Mature animation: Reviews from *Arcane* to *Unicorn: Warriors Eternal*

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Introduction

This 66-page e-book consists of seven chapters. It brings together my reviews of *Arcane*, *gen:LOCK*, *Metal Family*, *Dead End: Paranormal Park*, *Velma* (here and here), and *Unicorn: Warriors Eternal,* along with concluding remarks. These chapters were posted on my personal WordPress blog in November 2022, January 13, 2023; January 19, 2023; February 2023, April 2, 2023; April 4, 2023, and July 2023. All these were previously published in *Pop Culture Maniacs*, apart from the reviews of *Dead End* and *gen:LOCK,* which were published in *The Geekiary*. The latter review was not in line with the mainstream perceptions of this show, which were negative. If I even watched this series again, I would write a different review if this show came out today. I can say that I'm getting better, improving, and would not see the show in the same light, and be more critical. In one version of the review, I crossed out parts which I disagreed with, but here I am posting the whole text without that, as I'm not sure I agree with any of that review anymore.

I did some spell-check and other revisions to ensure this text made sense, and to correct any errors that I made in the original text, which comes to over 19,000 words! Otherwise, the text is almost the same. Happy Reading!

- Burkely

Chapter One: Arcane Season One Review (Spoiler-Filled)

As the streaming wars have picked up, there has been a push for more animated series than ever before, which includes basing these series on comics, like *Dead Endia* and *Hilda*, or on video games, like the upcoming *Earthworm Jim* series. The latter is the case for the nine-episode-long *Arcane*, a science fantasy and action-adventure story, adapted from a multiplayer game called League of Legends – and is for those over age 16, with language, violence, smoking, blood, and death. This series, which has become a smash hit for Netflix, ranking at the top of the charts for the streaming platform, has been renewed for a second season due to the intense audience interest.

Arcane is a relatively simple story within a bigger framework, with a main cast consisting of eight individuals. One of the primary stories is the separation of two sisters: Vi (voiced by Hailee Steinfeld) and Jinx/Powder (voiced by Ella Purnell). They are on different sides of a war between the Zaun under city and Piltover, a well-off, utopian paradise. This story is interlinked with the rise of Jayce Talis (voiced by Kevin Alejandro), who works with Viktor (voiced by Harry Lloyd) to control magic and make it usable to those in the upper city. Silco (voiced by Jason Spisak) takes in Jinx, while Caitlyn Kiramman (voiced by Katie Leung) is tasked by Jayce with tracking down Vi, leading to her traveling to the under city. There's also Ekko (voiced by Reed Shannon), an under-city fighter who helps Caitlyn and Vi, the under-city crime lord Vander

(voiced by JB Blanc), and another member of the council, Mel Medarda (voiced by Toks Olagundoye).

My personal taste in animation is wide, and as a result, I tend to not watch many animations that are very realistic in their depiction of characters, like the mature French animated film, *I Lost My Body* or the animated series *Undone*, with its rotoscoping. I also tend to give those who work on such shows wide latitude, as the way that characters tend to be depicted or presented is not why I usually dislike shows. *Arcane* was no exception to this. Critics have praised the show for its blend of computer-generated and hand-drawn animation. And truly, this is one of the series' strongest elements, something which other animated series fail at. I liked the steampunk feel of the upper city, reminding me of Steamland in *Disenchantment* – with deep detail put into each frame with nothing wasted. This includes the Hexgates, amazing visuals shown in each episode, and the action and fight scenes. I hope that the *Arcane* crew were well-paid because a lot of blood, sweat, and tears were put into making this series.

Arcane is a story which has three distinct acts, setting its story up more like a play than a television series. The story begins in the under city, introducing viewers to Vi, Jinx (then named Powder), Vander, and their whole crew, as they fight against a crime lord, Silco. Vander has an agreement with the Enforcers of the under city, not wanting to cause too much trouble. As you can imagine, this does not go well. Vander is killed by Silco's goon. Vi is captured. Jinx goes into Silco's arms, as she sees him as family. With the end of the show's first act, the second act involves even more world building. Viewers see more of the upper city of Piltover. Jayce's power grows, leading him up the ranks and onto the council, even displacing his former mentor Heimerdinger (voiced by Mick Wingert). There is a growing conflict between the under city and the upper city. In the show's final act, this conflict comes to the fore as Jinx, Vi, and Caitlyn figure out what side they are on in this war. The series has themes of class oppression, even when it happens in a world where there is no sexism, racism, or homophobia, reminding me of similar themes in the 10-episode cyberpunk sci-fi series, *Sherwood*, which is much more family-friendly than *Arcane.*

Some have praised the show's diversity, including its portrayal of ethnicity and disability representation (since Viktor has a bad limp and uses a cane), and the praise is well-earned. Human experimentation is a major theme of the series, as is the allure of power and privilege, the corruption of someone's dreams, and the consequences of technological progress. Family

separation, acceptance, and struggle, either between siblings, like Vi and Jinx, or between mother and daughter, as the case for Mel and her mother, are also recurring themes.

Character development is an important part of *Arcane*. The growing relationship between Caitlyn and Vi is a perfect example of such development, with both attracted to one another despite their different circumstances. Amanda Overton, a writer for the series, confirmed that the pair were in a relationship, and said that in Piltover, there is no homophobia or stigma against those who are gay, meaning that she could marry someone of any race or gender, with that person becoming "part of her house." This relationship was first hinted in the show's fifth episode, in the middle of part 5, where Vi brings Caitlyn to a place known as the Pleasure House to find information and tells her "you're hot, Cupcake." Overton described this line as clarifying her character and showing that she loved other women. Caitlyn shows, in the same episode, attraction to another woman she talks to in the Pleasure House. In the show's last act, Vi moves in with Caitlyn, becoming her roommate. Jinx describes Caitlyn as Vi's girlfriend, in the final episode, and Vi does not object to this description. It is a stretch to see "bisexual energy" radiating from them, as one critic opined. I'd say it's more of gay energy. Neither has shown any attraction to men, at least not as directly and strongly. This is apart from Vi calling Jayce a "pretty boy" in the eighth episode, as the latter was likely a way to work with Jayce so they could try to take down Silco together.

As a result, there has been a lot of discourse online about their growing connection to each other, with fans shipping them as CaitVi, with a flurry of fan art (and fan cams) of both characters together, and their moments together even shown on the show's official account. There is, to use a line from a fan when referring to a scene from *The Owl House* episode

"Enchanted Grom Fright," no heterosexual explanation for their relationship. Both characters clearly are in a relationship with each other. It remains to be seen how this will develop in the show's second season. From the discourse on sites like Twitter, it is clear that fans, including those like Miranda Mundt of Webtoon's *LoveBot*, are excited and overjoyed by the moments in the series itself. The line between whether the LGBTQ identities of characters should be subtle or more outward is a continual struggle among creators, their crews, and the opinion of fans. Each show has a different approach, with some going with a subtle approach, like *Twelve Forever* having protagonist Reggie Abbott blush at Connelly, a girl in the eighth grade, and others being more overt, like Ruby and Sapphire in *Steven Universe*. Whether to have something as subtle or not is up to those who create a show, with one approach not necessarily better than another. This subtlety should not be confused with queer baiting, when a show hints at same-sex romance or LGBTQ representation but does not depict this representation.

Unfortunately, *Arcane* has a bit of a double standard. Jayce and Mel Medarda have a brief overt heterosexual, and interracial, relationship which involves kissing and sexual intercourse. Vi and Caitlyn have growing feelings toward each other, even sleeping on the same bed as one another. However, they do not kiss in the show. While this would fit with the characters of Vi and Caitlyn, that they are taking this slower as they are from different walks of life, one from privilege and opulence, another from poverty and desperation. Jayce and Mel are of the same class, the same social standing. So, that undoubtedly affects how they act toward one another. Vi clearly sees Caitlyn as sweet as a cupcake, hence her nickname for her, and was named by Overton as her favorite character. Since everyone on the show's crew is working to tell the same story, hopefully, the relationship between Vi and Caitlyn becomes more overt in the show's next season, potentially becoming even more the signature romance of the show. Some fans have also shipped Jayce and Viktor together, although that ship was never made canon in the show itself, so its existence is only in the show's fanon.

Apart from these deficiencies, the characters of *Arcane* shine through. Personally, I was not familiar with most of the voice actors, apart from Toks Olagundoye, who I remembered as voicing Commodore Winifred in an episode of *Cleopatra in Space*, or Captain Amina Ramsey in an episode of *Star Trek: Lower Decks*. She also voiced Countess Cleo in *Carmen Sandiego*, Madame President in *Kid Cosmic*, and Nanefua in *Steven Universe*, to name a few, and played Kemi Talbot in *Veep*. The voice acting is one of the show's strong points. The voices

match completely with the expressions of the characters and emotions, making them more relatable to viewers, including when it comes to the relationship between Caitlyn and Vi over the show's arc, beginning with gay moments and moving onto something more. The show's characters are relatively diverse. They aren't a cast of White characters. Rather, the cast includes many people of color, whether in the upper city or the under city. The voice cast itself is comprised of a diverse grouping as well.

There are several areas where *Arcane* falls short. Although I generally like the animation, some effects, like those from Jinx's perspective are a bit too cutesy. Perhaps this is the hand-drawn animation part that some critics referred to, but it felt a bit out of place. While the opening song "Enemy," is good, it's disappointing to see a mainstream pop rock band, Imagine Dragons, as the artist, rather than someone lesser known. The opening theme by JID, a Black rapper and singer, in a few episodes, is a bit stronger than the "Enemy" opening theme. I might have appreciated the song more if it was in the style of *RWBY*, sung by Casey Lee Williams, in that it would tell you the broad contours of what would happen during the season. I would not say the intro was "badass" as one reviewer put it, and would have been better with another song, although the instrumental pieces are much better than the opening. These elements of *Arcane* seem to be there to appeal to the masses who will watch it as it surges in popularity. The show is a way for Riot Games, which created *League of Legends*, to get people to play the video game.

Another aspect that irked me was the length of the episodes of *Arcane*. Each episode is between 39 and 44 minutes long. This means it is hard to watch them all in one sitting unless you have that much time to spare. I don't understand why the episodes couldn't have been shorter

and divided into more episodes. There could have been double the number of episodes if they were of a shorter length. The time in each episode reminds me of the variable lengths of *Mr. Robot* episodes, which made it hard to know how much time you would be spending watching an episode, and hard to plan other activities during the day around it. These longer episode lengths make the show less accessible to viewers. If the episode lengths had been like *Inside Job*, it would have made for an easier binge.

As for a second season, it will probably air sometime in 2023, rather than next year. Moving into season two, hopefully we will see more of the world beyond the upper city and under city, as going to other locations could expand the story tremendously. In addition, I'm hopeful that the show's music selection will be improved, that the cutesy animation effects are removed entirely, and that season two introduces more LGBTQ characters other than Vi and Caitlyn. Considering that the relationship between Leona and Diana in the *League of Legends* was made canon recently, I suspect there will be additional queer representation in a second season. Outside of those larger hopes, from a plot perspective, the next season will likely deal with the possible death of everyone in the Council, due to Jinx's missile. Vi and Cait may have to pick up the pieces in the aftermath of this destruction. It is even possible that Jinx will be redeemed.

Despite my criticisms of the series and its mature content at times, I would recommend it. It remains engaging, entertaining, and relatable, easily pulling in viewers.

Arcane is currently streaming on Netflix.

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Chapter Two: "gen:LOCK": A Mature Animation Which Takes Risks

What if you could upload your mind to a huge robot and save parts of it with other people? *gen:LOCK*, an anime-influenced mature animated series set 50 years in the future, tries to answer that question. This series takes risks with its LGBTQ themes, focus on trauma, science, religion, climate change, and much more! Let's go in-depth and look at how this series explores these concepts.

The basics of *gen:LOCK*

gen:LOCK centers around members of the gen:LOCK program, who upload their minds to huge mechas which are known as "Holons." In this dystopia, an international group known as The Polity fights an invading force known as The Union. According to Dan Dominguez, the showrunner for season 2, the Union is a hyper-religious state which rules as a "post-capitalist theocracy." The Polity, on the other hand, is "an oligarchy of secular capitalists." The series began airing on Rooster Teeth and Adult Swim on January 26, 2019. After an over two-year hiatus, this anime-influenced mature animated series returned on HBO Max on November 4, 2021. As a warning, this review discusses some spoilers for *gen:LOCK.* It will also discuss topics such as death, blood, murder, suicide, trauma, and sexual intercourse.

The show's eight-episode first season introduces viewers to the gen:LOCK team, an experimental science unit led by Dr. Rufus Weller (David Tennant), with former military pilot Julian Chase (Michael B. Jordan) and Iran-born resistance fighter Yasamin 'Yaz' Madrani

(Golshifteh Farahani) as its first members. Later recruits include Irish hacker Cameron "Cammie" MacCloud (Maisie Williams), former Japanese military operative Kazu Iida (Kōichi Yamadera), and former Russian secret forces agent Val/entina 'Val' Romanyszyn (Asia Kate Dillon). While Madrani, Cammie, Kazu, and Val have no family left, Chase has a mother, Roberta (Shari Belafonte), and sister, Driana 'Dri' (G.K. Bowes), who were said to be lost in the show's first episode. Throughout the season, he tries to reconnect with his ex-girlfriend, Miranda Worth (Dakota Fanning). The team works on behalf of Polity's military commander Col. Raquel Marin (Monica Rial) as they try and stop the Union's military advance, with Chase fighting alongside his comrades against a copy of himself, known as Nemesis, in mechanized robots piloted by their minds.

The eight-episode second season of gen:LOCK picks up 4-6 months later, with the team barely fighting off copies of Chase known as the Nemesi. Dr. Fatima Jha (Anisha Nagarajan), scientist and ex-wife of Dr. Weller, defects to the Union, working on their doomsday weapon known as the Twilight Project. Chase struggles with his inner demon. Marin confronts Marc Holcroft, a powerful investor and political figure (Matt Hullum in Season 1, Kiff VaudenHeuvel in Season 2) about his deception. Cammie leaves the team and "ascends" while Kazu dies in a bloody battle. In the final episodes, the team work together to save everyone, and turn into nanotech. The Union falls, with Brother Tate (Angus Sampson) murdered by a monster he helped create and the team decides their own destinies.

Genderfluidity and LGBTQ themes

In the season one episode "Training Daze," Val tells their team members that they are genderfluid after they appear in the virtual reality world, Ether, in a masculine form. They explain to a confused and uncomfortable Kazu their body is physically female presently but are thinking of a change. They tell Yaz they have shifted their gender several times in the past and may do in the future. They state that sometimes they are male, but not at present.

When Kazu asks Val what they were born as, and they tell him that he will never know. Val explains this as sensibly as Caraway telling Rosemary he is transgender in the third episode of *High Guardian Spice*. In fact, Cammie recognizes Val is genderfluid off the bat, but notes it is not her place to talk about it, letting Val describe it in their own words.

Val is groundbreaking as a character. Genderfluidity is a "question of internal personal identity." It is more than one's gender expression, referring to a gender expression or non-binary gender identity, or both, which can change over time.

Val smashes apart the tropes often attributed to genderfluid characters. Val doesn't change their gender with the flick of a switch. They are not duplicitous, do not have many personas, nor are they insecure. Their assigned gender is only briefly mentioned. Instead, Val is voiced by Dillon who describes their gender identity as falling "outside the boxes of man or woman," identifying as "neither a man or a woman."

Yaz asks Val if they have changed their gender before

After Tatiana Maslany (who played a trans man in *Orphan Black*) turned down the role, insisting that "trans actors should play trans parts," it led the show to cast Dillon. Val's genderfluidity is only part of their character. They are a skilled fighter who usually has a positive nature. In the season 2 episode "Together. Together", Val kisses a girl and tells their friend, Oleg, that they are pansexual. They then beat up someone who insults them with a queerphobic slur.

The show's second season expands on Val's identity and goes beyond. Kazu has an identity crisis of sorts. He says he has issues with his avatar's form, which is presenting female, with Yaz saying that while he looks different, he is still a man. Cammie agrees to assist Kazu who wants his avatar restored to its "true" form. He blames the change on Val mind sharing with him. Cammie later finds out that his code hasn't changed. Rather the avatar's change is due to his subconscious.

Val talks with Kazu about it, saying they can restore his avatar. They conclude that he is so afraid of being vulnerable that his subconscious made him female. They criticize him for manifesting the idea that femininity is weakness, something inherent in his toxic masculine bravado. Val believes that the only answer is to dig deeper into Kazu's past, but he is afraid to revisit memories due to a rough childhood. Both connect with each other and kiss, sharing their insecurities with one another.

Kazu's gender change is not a sign he is genderfluid like Val, or that he is trans. Instead, it is a twisted and warped expression of his vulnerability. It is possible he is queer, as he has sex with Val when they are in their male form, but that part of him isn't explored in the show.

According to the show's companion podcast, Kristle Peluso, writer for the episode "Together. Together," said there is mutual recognition of traits between Val and Kazu, both coming together to deal with their traumas. Val assists Kazu with his gender expectations, toxic masculinity, and his incorrect association of weakness with femininity.

Apart from Kazu, we can say with confidence that the real Robert Sinclair (Blaine Gibson), not the fake Union spy, is gay. He kisses his boyfriend, Chris, in the episode "The Grand Guignol." He even calls out to him after the Polity kidnaps him. His voice actor described him as a fighter and lover who is doing some "pretty rad" stuff assisting people in no-man's land.

Trauma and the subconscious in *gen:LOCK*

Trauma and the subconscious are major themes in *gen:LOCK*, mainly by the show's main character, Chase. In both seasons he must kill copies of himself, but in the second season he wrestled with a demon in his mindscape who haunts him. Over the course of the season, he first pushes away his team members who ask him for help, but later accepts their assistance.

Chase learns that the demon is another version himself and embraces it. Chase's other self tells him that he needs to be whole and says he doesn't need to be a copy. Instead, he can "be the upgrade." Chase lets in the demon/other self into his mindscape, and they become one.

Singleton also argued that although some may interpret that Cammie committed suicide, there is more to "ascension." Cammie sees her ascension as joining a community after her gen:LOCK family shunned her. As he described it, she wanted to be part of a bigger family and had been into mind sharing more than others on the team. Cammie reappears in a body that can manipulate the nanobots but is still figuring out how to control it. In the final episode, Cammie

describes herself as a symbol of both sides of the war coming together, a path to the end of the war, a path which Val, Yaz, and even Chase, join.

Brother Tate pontificates in the first episode of season two about ascension

Another theme is the brutality of war and the trauma which comes with it. Chase is emblematic of those who only exist in copies as he has been severed from his physical body. His relationship with Miranda becomes non-existent as she believed he was dead for four years!

Tate sends the copy of Chase in the Union to a sort of hell because he felt "forced" to go to extremes to stop the Polity. In another episode, the Polity activates the Hammer system and kills everyone on the battlefield, including Jodie, which shocks Tate.

The story of *gen:LOCK* harps on many themes. One of those is the importance of family, especially for Chase. He often thinks about his mother and sister. The gen:LOCK team are like a family of sorts as well.

The draw of family is one of the reasons that Cammie ascends and joins the Flow in the episode "The Grand Guignol." She believes she is part of the Union's "true community" and those in Babylon remind her of her childhood. In the final episode, Chase and Dri reunite and pledge to stay with her at the end of the episode.

The struggle between the individual and the collective is an important theme in *gen:LOCK*. One of the ways that the team can fight the Union is to share minds. As a result of the process, you lose a part of yourself, with parts of each person feeding into someone else, with your body decanted to a digital space.

For Chase, this becomes a sticking point since all he has left is his memories. So, he is very reticent to mind share, especially after he exceeds his uptime (how long a cyberbrain can run before it has to return to a body without causing bodily harm).

The sub-story of Robert Sinclair leading a rag-tag group of rebels, ferrying people out of no-man's land to New Zealand, is symbolic of the pull between the collective and the individual. He wants to assist people, but he wants to do it alone without anyone else. He does not want to choose sides in the war, after seeing the horrors of the Union and the Polity executing Union soldiers who had surrendered. He is on no one's side in the war. Chase and his sister Dri later seem to come to the same conclusion.

Holocroft later brings Sinclair to a secret facility so he can become a huge robot named Odin. Luckily, Cammie frees Sinclair from this nightmare. In the final episode, he uses Odin to fight off the Twilight beast, even able to defeat it on his own terms.

Those in the gen:LOCK team all have something in common: they are dealing with a lot of emotional trauma and stress. For instance, Chase is killing copies of himself repeatedly, and the team is being worn down. The gen:LOCK team are only some of the characters in popular media who experience stress and trauma.

Maturity and taking risks

The content of the series is mature. The show's first season is rated TV-14 for suggestive dialogue, language, and violence. The second season's rating increased further to TV-MA for language. There is a warning that the episodes may "trigger seizures for those with photosensitive epilepsy."

The second season is darker and more mature than the first. The third episode of season 2 has an additional warning for "sexual situations," i.e., when Chase accidentally walks in and sees Miranda having sex with Jodie, and there is a scene in a robo strip club, with Kazu and Val drinking together at a bar.

gen:LOCK, like *Arcane* at times, displays heterosexual relationships more openly than possible queer ones. The sex scene between Miranda and Jodie is a bit awkward, like the sex scene between Jayce Tallis and Mel Medarda in *Arcane*. But Vi and Caitlyn, two women in love with one another, don't kiss in the show's first season, even though they are the signature romance of the series! In *gen:LOCK,* the romance between Chase and Miranda has a prominent role in the first episode and is an undercurrent in the series.

The voice actor for Jodie, Chad James, noted that Miranda and Jodie had relationship friction, and said that he made Jodie more annoying in the sex scene. He revealed the name "Jodie" refers to someone who sleeps with a soldier's girlfriend while the soldier is away on deployment.

gen:LOCK is a dark, mature series, especially by the second season. The violence experienced is a result of the war itself. It is yet another reminder of the consequences of war, something which affects everyone. The series does not have excessive cruelty or kill off characters for "shock value." Rather, specific people are dying for specific reasons.

To give one example, Cammie believes she can't take it anymore and ascends at the end of the episode "The Grand Guignol." She doesn't "die" but rather she gains new life, almost a sort of reincarnation. It is sad to see characters like Jodie and Kazu die, but there's a lot of misplaced anger and outrage. Such feelings were inevitable because many episodes are heartbreaking and emotionally tense.

gen:LOCK excels at raising anxiety-inducing morality questions. The show's head writer, Daniel Dominguez, said that he doesn't believe in heroes or villains, good or evil. He argued that morality is grey, rather than something that is black or white. He also described the show as about people entering adulthood.

Marin says something like Chase in the episode "The Grand Guignol." She declares that the Polity aren't "good guys." Rather, they are soldiers, not superheroes, saying his black-and-white morality doesn't apply, justifying atrocities. She claims that Chase's instability is a virus which has infected the gen:LOCK team and worries about it spreading. Miranda tries to convince Marin to change her ways as rises the Polity hierarchy, but is unsuccessful.

Both the Polity and the Union have done despicable things. They justify them within their own ideologies, leading to despair, death, and suffering. For instance, Marin does not care if the Polity's strike on Babylon kills civilians. Nor does she care about the Polity pilots killed by the

Union's anti-aircraft weapon. There are questions about situational morality throughout the show. No one is evil without repose.

Nothing is sacred in this show. The Union platform, in the first episode, knocks over the Statue of Liberty, causing it to crumble into pieces, a direct response to the destruction of the Kaaba by the Polity. As writer Kristie Peluso put it in the show's companion podcast, the series is making clear the brutality of war and moral greyness. Kazu's death is an example of this brutality, as he is dead in the physical world but will live on in their memories. You could even argue that the show itself has a strong anti-war stance.

Science, religion, and climate change in *gen:LOCK*

The show raises the question of whether science and technology should be used for civilian or military purposes. It also focuses on organized religion like *Disenchantment.* For instance, the gen:LOCK program, as Dr. Weller states in season one, was meant for peaceful purposes. But the Polity used it to fight battles. Still, Weller believed it could save lives and end the war.

This is the case with nanotech, too. Originally intended to help stave off climate collapse, the Union later used it to tear apart soldiers of the Polity and became a justification for why the Polity attacked the Union in the first place.

The ability to copy others is used for devastating effect. Copies of people cause much of the damage, death, and destruction in the war. Cammie works on technology allowing them to connect virtually to holons. Dr. Jha works on the Twilight Initiative, a doomsday weapon of some part which the Union has in its arsenal, a last resort if the Polity gets too close to victory.

To prepare for the use of this initiative, in the episode "The Third Way," Tate prepares a field test in no-man's land of the nanobots, consuming people and everything else. In the show's final episode, Cammie projects Chase into the Nemesi and frees them.

In the Union, there is the Omnifaith, a hybrid of all the religions of the world combined into one. In this religion, people take part in mass suicides, called the "Ascension," and have their bodies join the Flow, an energy force/mist. This is done with the belief they will go to the afterlife. It can reportedly be controlled if someone listens to it. This religion mixes science and religion, creating zealots, including the mother of Chase and Dri. Tate's beliefs are complete hogwash as the Twilight monstrosity kills Tate without a second thought.

Jha looks in wonder at the Flow around her, seriously considering Tate's offer to work for the Union

The mist that people are turned into once they "ascend", is as writer Maasai Singleton put it, the same thing that the Polity calls the "smoke." Those in the Union see the Flow as a form of ancestor worship. Even so, she argued that the Union is not a cult. Yaz and Chase are directly affected by the ascension, as their parents engage in the ritual. Tate even claims that those who don't ascend are lost to the dust.

In some ways, those in the secular Polity have faith of sorts. Sinclair argues that both the Polity and Union worships gods they invented: robots. Marin demands loyalty and belief in the chain of command, not accepting anyone questioning her decisions. This is even though she could have caused Chase to be less skeptical of her if she had divulged some of the information. Her paranoia even causes her to order covert surveillance on the gen:LOCK team.

According to Singleton, the show was inspired by the real-life effects of climate change. Cammie comes from a family killed by a disease because of climate change. Marin and Tate hailed from places affected by climate change. The latter is from Australia and the former from Puerto Rico. Brother Tate saves a koala named Mr. Cook in Australia where wildfires and human animal cruelty are threatening many koalas.

In the episode "The Third Way," Jha says that before Mars, the poor had to make "peace with climate death." She says she sided with the Union because the Polity were cashing in on "false hope." In another episode, New York faces another deluge, with Tate lamenting the inevitable vanishing of the city. This means the show has a strong parallel to *Sherwood and Gargantia on the Verdurous Planet*, series which are set years after the climate catastrophe.

Music, voice acting, and cast

The show's music selection is an important draw for the series. The opening theme of the first season is catchy. It is the song "Belgrade", performed by Battle Tapes. This band does much of the series' music. This music accompanies an introduction which shows an "evil" Chase in the second half of the first season.

The second season has a similar introduction except it only has "elegant" electronic music. Chase and Kazu glitch and nanobots consume Cammie. The opening sets the tone for each episode, preparing you for the episode to come, like the beginning of *RWBY* episodes. Battle Tapes continued to perform some music in the second season. The soundtrack is one of the strongest points of this series with some episodes having dramatic rock music.

The voice acting of *gen:LOCK* is smooth and natural. It is coupled with detailed background art and animation. Many of the voice actors are well-known for their roles in animated and live-action series. Jordan is well-known for portraying Erik "Killmonger" Stevens in the 2018 *Black Panther* film and in two episodes of *What If...?*. Similarly, Dillon is known for their role as Taylor Mason in *Billions* and Brandy in *Orange Is the New Black*. Other voice actors have had many anime, animated, and live-action roles.

The cast is diverse, composed of Black men, Black women, a Japanese man, an Iranian woman, a Latine man, and those of Spanish, Indian, Indigenous, Cuban, and French Polynesian descent. Rial said that when she voiced Marin, a Latine character who is Puerto Rican, she paid homage to her dad. She also described that she spoke to her friends about Marin's accent in the show to make sure she got it right.

In the episode "The Grand Guignol," Marin talks about her Puerto Rican identity. She notes that her grandmother was the governor of the island, and instituting martial law during a climate disaster. She argues that these actions saved lives.

The characters are a diverse grouping. For instance, Chase is a Black man and core of the story. Evan Narcisse, who wrote *Rise of the Black Panther*, joined the writers room of the show, working to define and inform Chase as a character. The reported death of Chase's mom and sister are an important influence on his character. The mechanic, Migas, has a Latine Texas accent with "Louisianian tones," which was, according to his voice actor, inspired by his family.

In the Ether, Yaz wears a hijab, Cammie is a bunny, Kazu has a tough look, and Julian wore more casual clothes than anyone else. Furthermore, Fatima Jha is an Indian woman and major Polity scientist. All these characters are dynamic and carry the story forward, each in their own way. This series does diverse characters right. This is something which other shows should emulate rather than having stereotypical characters.

Those working on *gen:LOCK* are a talented group of people. For instance, season one executive producer Burnie Burns is a former CEO of Rooster Teeth, creator of *Red vs. Blue*, and executive producer of *RWBY*. Jordan, apart from his television and film roles, co-produces the series through Outlier Society Productions, his production company. Mayo, president of Orion Pictures, served as Head of Production for Outlier Society. She was married to actress Lena Waithe until 2020.

Levin, producer for the *gen:LOCK*'s second season, was an executive producer for various live-action series. Hall, another executive producer on the season, assisted with many live-action productions. Luna, one of the voice actors, wrote for many Rooster Teeth series such as *RWBY* and *Camp Camp*, and developed *Nomad of Nowhere*. Kristle Peluso, who wrote for *High Guardian Spice* and *Onyx Equinox*, also wrote for *gen:LOCK*. Daniel Dominguez, head writer of the series, said that he made all the writers re-watch the first season before they began writing second season.

The show's creator, Greg Haddock, voiced Roman Torchwick in *RWBY* and formerly headed animation for Rooster Teeth. He is no longer working at Rooster Teeth following people calling out terrible work conditions at the company's studio. He likely had little or no role in producing Season 2. Haddock, Burnie Burns, and Matt Hullum were executive producers for the eight-episode first season. Ryan P. Hall and Jordan Levin were executive producers for the eight-episode second season. Michael B. Jordan and Alana Mayo were executive producers for both seasons.

Future of *gen:LOCK* after season 2

If *gen:LOCK* gets a third season, it will likely explore what happens to the main characters. At the end of the final episode, "Touch What's In Front of You," the members of the team go their separate ways. Chase stays with Dri in New York, Val and Yaz go to Babylon, and Cammie travels to meet Holcroft in Geneva.

Such a season could explore the journeys of each character, who are still united in a quest to save the world, and humanity, from death. We did not see Caliban at risk as the Union, nor the Polity, realized he was a copy of Dr. Weller, but that would be another possible plotline for the season.

The show is a bit fractured across platforms. The show's first season aired on Rooster Teeth, Crunchyroll, and Adult Swim, but the second season has only aired on HBO Max. While both seasons are on HBO Max, only season 1 is on Crunchyroll and Rooster Teeth. This makes watching it tricky unless one only watches it on HBO Max. Possibly on February 2, 2022, it will appear on Rooster Teeth's website. It is not known whether season 2 will appear on Crunchyroll.

The second season was not "hollow" and did not have "bad" writing. It did seem a bit rushed. I wish there were more episodes to expand the story. This might be a result of the show's crew trying to put in as much content as they can considering having no third season. These are all signs that the show won't get another season.

In the end, while I have my criticisms, *gen:LOCK* is a solid series. It has themes, ideas, and plots which will be relevant in the days, months, and years to come, even if some turn their nose up at the show.

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Chapter 3: Metal Family Review

In recent years, there has been an increase in indie animations, including on platforms such as YouTube. One of those series is the musical-themed Russian mature animation series, *Metal Family*.

The action-adventure and drama series focuses on a Russian family of metal fans, each with their own personalities: there are Victoria and Glam, two metalheads in love with one another, and they have two children, Heavy and Dee. It follows the creative ways that the family deals with problems every day and manifests various tropes. Dee is 15 years old and Heavy is 13. Victoria is 37 and Glam is 39-40.

The series has several interesting small details that set it apart from other animation series. For example, the opening of each episode begins with the character, or characters, hanging up their key, with the way each character hangs up their key a specific reflection of their personalities. There are also various pop culture references throughout the series to bands such as Metallica, System of a Down, Black Sabbath, Bon Jovi, and Led Zeppelin. Unlike some other series, this show takes place in a blurred world, without any specific location.

Metal Family does not shy away from mature topics. Victoria often drinks and smokes, while her husband, Glam, does not. She even gambles. The last part of the first season focuses on Glam Shvagenbagen's troubled childhood going to a music conservatory. He meets a friend

named Ches/ Chive who introduced him to Twisted Sister, heavy metal music, and gives him his current nickname. He leaves home for good after living with his abusive father, Gustav. Leaving his past behind, he chooses to be part of the "rabble" as his father puts it. He finds a family for himself in music and in the companionship of Victoria.

The show plays with the idea of a "strong man" defending a "weak" woman. In this series, Glam is diminutive but nasty in a polite way while Victoria is buff and brash. She is not afraid to throw a person out of a window or punch a hole through a wall, if warranted. Glam is more calculating and can solve problems by using his mind. Victoria likes to smash things apart – as she does in an escape room in an episode. She is a little like Princess Bean in *Disenchantment*, an alcoholic, and Harley Quinn in the series of the same name, who carries around a baseball bat which she uses to protect herself, those she cares about, and fight for what she believes is right.

The series is produced by a small team and is created by Alina Kovaleva. Xydownik co-directed the series with Kovaleva. Both work as series animators. According to the fandom site for the series, Koveleva works on the series full-time, using Adobe Animate CC. It took over two years to create the show's first season. Alexey Khrapov worked in the show's sound department. Alexey Vasilevsky composed original music, apart from the show's other music. Karin Karimova worked as a violinist, Daniyl Yakovenko as a music consultant, and Luis Rojas as a guitar soloist.

The Russian voice actors have been consistent. Blin voices Glam and Dee. Roman Volkov voices Gustav and Xydownik voices Heavy. Kovaleva voiced a Youtube Instructor in a 2021 episode as well as Victoria. Xydownik also voices Ches in two episodes, along with characters like Rowd and the Conservatory Dean. Flynn The VA voices Drusilla. There's also a background character named Celestie, and therapist Dr. Hans.

The English dub introduced new voice actors, including Elliot Cancel as Chive / Ches, Randolph Castellanos as Dee, Lydia Shvagenbagen, and Richard Armstrong, Hoctor as Gustav, London Hartman as Heavy, Kylie Ann as Mary Shvagenbagen, Ry Harte as Glam, and Chiari Queen as Victoria. Hoctor also voices biker gang member Bug, Ann voices Anna, a cynical radical feminist.

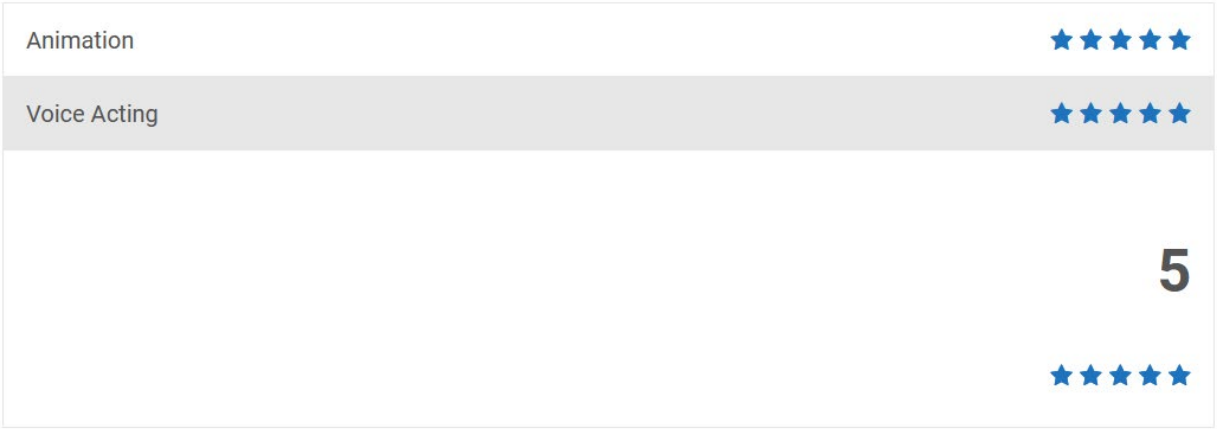
The series first aired on September 13, 2018, released in Russian, with English subtitles added after its release, ending its run in 2020. The pilot episode was also a music video sung by Avantasia, is entitled "The Story ain't Over." Since February 2021, an English dub of the episodes has been released on a separate YouTube channel, with a hilarious 3-minute trailer for the release of the English dub. Through 2021, the 10-episode first season aired on YouTube and the second season began in late December 2021. Oksana Gunchenko helped translate and adapt the episodes of the series.

The series has been positively received by fans, with over 140 fan fics on Archive of Our Own, garnering hundreds of thousands of views on YouTube, and has high rankings on IMDB. Hundreds of thousands more follow a fan site for the show on the Russian language social media platform, VK. This is impressive for a series with relatively new voice actors, with this series as their first big roles, and even for animators. A few are involved in other indie animated projects, like Kylie Ann as an animator on *Legends of Myiorda*, an anime/cartoon series. Some previously worked on Russian language productions.

Updates about the series are shared on Xydownik's Russian-language YouTube channel, the Instagram account of Kovaleva, a channel on Telegram, and Kovaleva's VK account. Like *Helluva Boss*, Heavy, one of the show's characters, has an official Instagram account, posting candid photos from his life. This encourages people to be more deeply invested in the show. There's even an official store to buy merchandise and items related to the show.

The voice acting and animation of *Metal Family* were intriguing. The story kept me watching the episodes and I say this as a person who likes listening to metalheads like Caleb Hyles and the band Twisted Sister. The characters were complex enough and were not stereotypes which made me excited about what was going to come next. In the end, I'd highly recommend this series, especially for those who like badass characters, music, and compelling stories.

Metal Family is available on YouTube.



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Chapter 4: "Dead End: Paranormal Park" - An Inclusive Horror Series For All

Dead End: Paranormal Park follows the story of two teens, Barney and Norma, who work at a haunted theme park during the summer. They face zombies, witches, and other challenges along the way.

Dead End: Paranormal Park is an animated supernatural horror fantasy series created by Hamish Steele, a British gay autistic comics writer. It is based on Steele's *DeadEndia* graphic novel series and his 2014 "Dead End" animated short. As a warning, this recommendation discusses some spoilers for season one of *Dead End: Paranormal Park*.

Barney (left) and Norma (right) are in shock after learning they might be eaten.

Dead End: Paranormal Park centers around Barney Guttman (Zack Barack), a gay Jewish trans man, and Norma Khana, a woman of Pakistani descent who is autistic. She was described as "neurodiverse" in the show's official press release. They show up for the same job at a haunted house in Phoenix Parks, an amusement park owned by Pauline Phoenix (Miss Coco Peru). It is much different than what they imagined.

17-year-olds Barney and Norma are almost possessed by the demon king Temeluchus (Alex Brightman) but Barney's animal companion, Pugsley (Brightman) saves Barney. His body is taken over, with Barney and Norma working together to trap Temeluchus inside a photograph, and causing Pugsley to gain the power to talk. In the process, they meet Courtney (Emily Osment), a thousand-year-old demon who gives them both jobs as security guards. She has a loyalty to Temeluchus, vowing to help him no matter what.

This is only scratching the surface. Barney has a family he feels that he can't trust after they didn't defend him (and his trans identity) when his grandma said mean and hurtful things about him. So, he begins living at the park instead of coming home. He feels that Pugsley is his only family. This contrasts with Norma, who seems to have a more loving family.

In later episodes, it is revealed that Barney has a crush on a man of Vietnamese descent, Logan "Logs" Nguyen (Kenny Tran). Also introduced is Badyah "Deathslide" Hassan (Kathreen Khavari), a Muslim of Iranian descent. Norma seems to have a crush on her. Barney's younger brother, Patrick Guttman (Tucker Chandler), appears later.

As the series moves forward, the protagonists face more challenges, like creepy old mascots, who cause terror but seem misunderstood. Norma's obsession with the park and its founder makes her helpful in many ways. This is especially the case when Pugsley, who can now talk, releases the mascots when he feels left behind by Barney. These themes are integral to this young adult animation.

Through it all, Barney finds a chosen family in the park. As he tells Norma, it is a place that can be himself, choosing if, and when, he tells people he is trans. It is different from when he is at home or a school, where everyone knows he is trans, causing extra pressure. This series expands trans storytelling in animation and LGBTQ+ storytelling. After all, Barney's voice actor, Zach Barack, is a trans man in real-life.

It is different for Norma, who struggles with social awkwardness. As it turns out, what Steele went through as an autistic (and gay) person himself informed the writing of her character. This makes the character even more genuine than autistic characters like Stephanie "Stephie" Bondu in *Assigned Male* or Entrapta in *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*.

Norma after facing her anxiety

In one episode, we learn the fears and anxieties of all the characters when a supposed guru claims he is there to "help" employees. Norma breaks people out of their fear-dreams and realizes her biggest fear is anxiety.

She reveals that her fear world is the real world. It causes the skull to crack, killing the instructor and making him explode. While this may seem gory for an animated show, it is nothing in comparison to the bloodiness of *The Executioner and Her Way of Life* or the bloody fights in *Helluva Boss*.

This contrasts with the fear of Barney, who does not fear his grandma, but his parents, feeling they don't have his back and won't support him. In the end, Norma confides in Barney, Courtney, and Pugsley that working at the park is her dream job.

Like any supernatural series, magic plays an important part. Courtney sees Puglsey, who has a shard of the demon kind in him, as a way to get home. This goes hand in hand with horror, like children possessed by a night spirit in one episode. But there can be levity.

The night spirit, Cheryl, and its component, Linda, the day spirit, are sisters, and dislike people labeling them as "hags". They leave to go to a place that is less judgy. This is not at all surprising considering that the series takes inspiration from the *Addams Family*, especially *Adams Family Values*, as tweets from Steele indicate. Pugsley is even named after Pugsley from the *Addams Family*, but also he is a pug dog, and Steele had a guinea pig with the same name.

The series sends the message that you should accept people for who they are and not make any assumptions, and be respectful of other people's identities. Shows with similar messages include *Avatar: The Last Airbender* and *The Legend of Korra*.

With Courtney, a character who is unaware of gender and uses any pronouns, according to the show's creator, as a protagonist, the series makes demons a big part of the story. She wants to go home to the demon realm, leading Barney, Pugsley, and Norma to even play on a game show, Hox's Castle. They do this in hopes of making Courtney feel better about herself, although they have to go through pain along the way, including Barney coming back from the dead.

Later in the series, Courtney finally gets back to the demon world. She gets what she wants after making a Faustian bargain with Pauline. She realizes it is not all she thought it would be. It is depressing and she is more alone than she is on Earth. So, she comes back.

On that note, love is an important theme in the series, either romantic love or familial love. Barney struggles with both, but especially the latter. By the end of the series, he has made amends with his parents, who commit to doing better and making the house more welcoming.

In the case of the former, he tries to express his feelings toward Logs. A Black lesbian couple at one point, and possession of his body at another point, try to help. In the final part of the series, Logs helps get him out of jail and both agree to start dating.

Norma, as the socially awkward one, slowly expresses her feelings toward Badyah. As Steele revealed in a message to a fan, Norma likes multiple genders and is not straight. Some reviewers called her a "neurodivergent POC lesbian" or simply said she has a queer relationship with another girl (Badyah). In any case, another season would likely expand on this relationship.

From left to right: Badyah, Norma, Courtney, Pugsley, Barney, and Logs

All the characters in this series have traumatic experiences. Even Barney admits he has a therapist at one point. They are almost killed or maimed on various occasions. Worse is when their souls exit their bodies when they take possession of Barney.

They learn the dark secrets of the park and who is behind the disappearance of the Pauline impersonators. At first, it seems like Barborah (Karen Maruyama), the custodian, is behind it, but it's more complex than that. They learn, when traveling through her that the real Pauline died. Someone else replaced her during Pauline's first commercial.

On that point, the series criticizes the cult of celebrity worship. Pauline is not the happy and goody two shoes type of character she seems to be. Instead, she is a bit of a monster, a phantom if you will. The park is not what it appears to be, with connections to the demon world and elsewhere.

There are occasional breaks in the fourth wall. Courtney says, in episode 7, she had "so much character development" since the first episode. This is akin to Peridot's retort in *Steven Universe: The Movie* after taking out the rejuvenator: "I could have lost all my character development".

The show's next-to-last episode is completely a musical. This is like many *Steven Universe* episodes since creator Rebecca Sugar is a big lover of musicals from what I've read. In some ways, it reminded me of the *Elena of Avalor* episode "Sweetheart's Day" when Armando causes everyone to sing throughout the episode. It also made me think of the anime series *Healer Girl* focused on a group of girls who have the power to heal people with their songs.

Similar to *gen:LOCK* and *The Executioner and Her Way of Life*, internal mental struggles, either with real or imagined beasts, are something the characters have to endure. It is similar to the latter in the sense that it is queer and gay in many ways.

The end of *Dead End* somewhat echoes the final episodes of *High Guardian Spice*. The latter series features two trans characters, Caraway and Snapdragon, the latter working through her transition throughout the series. Not surprisingly, the series creator, Raye Rodriguez, happily supported *Dead End*, along with other animated series like *Amphibia* and *Arcane*.

In *Dead End*, many of the characters are turned into stone. This is like the town of Lyngarth was accidentally turned to stone by a terrasphere by the catgirl, Olive, in *High Guardian Spice*. Different from that series is the fact that *Dead End* includes spirits like Pauline who come to save the park, and a demon king. This causes a demon general, Tammie, to retreat and flee in defeat.

A second season could pick up where the first season left off. It could be in the aftermath of Pauline being zapped out of existence by angels, who are about to begin their "visit" (assault). There could be more of a romantic relationship between Logs and Barney, who kiss in the final episode. The same could be the case for growing romantic feelings between Norma and Badyah.

Having said that, I need to tell you that Netflix, more than any other streaming service, has declared war on its animation department. The controversial series, *Q-Force*, and many high-profile series in development were canceled. Before this, series like *City of Ghosts*, *Centaur World*, *Kipo and the Age of Wonderbeasts*, and *Kid Cosmic*, ended.

As such, the prospect for *Dead End's* renewal looks grim, as do many other animated series currently on the platform, with a few exceptions. Hopefully, Netflix will see the value of LGBTQ+ storylines and a show with a diversity of experiences and identities, especially when it comes to trans stories, and continue it. But I'm not too confident in them doing so.

Debuting on 16 June 2022, all 10 episodes of *Dead End: Paranormal Park* season one are currently streaming on Netflix.

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Chapter 5: Velma Review

Velma is a mature animated series which mixes the genres of mystery, comedy horror, and thriller. It is based on characters from the *Scooby-Doo* franchise and is an origin story, of sorts, for Velma Dinkley, before the formation of Mystery Incorporated. Charles Grandy developed the series. He previously created *Guys with Kids,* produced episodes of *The Office*, and has been a creative collaborator with Mindy Kaling, the voice of Velma, since 2013. **This review will have spoilers**.

The plot of *Velma* primarily centers around the story of Velma Dinkley. She attempts to uncover the perpetrator who murdered two local teenage girls, Brenda and Krista, and circumstances behind her mother's disappearance.

She is soon joined by school news reporter Norville Rogers (voiced by Sam Richardson). Her former best friend, and popular girl, Daphne Blake (voiced by Constance Wu) also helps her, since her quest to find her biological parents draws her closer to Velma.

Unlike previous depictions, Velma is South Asian American, while Daphne is East Asian American, and Norville, often named "Shaggy" in previous Scooby-Doo iterations, is a Black man. This representation is reflected in the voice actors: Kaling is of Indian descent, Wu is of Taiwanese descent, and Richardson is a Black man of Ghanaian descent.

The only one of the original Mystery, Inc. crew who is portrayed as White is Fred Jones. He is a popular 16-year-old rich kid, heir of a fashion line for men, and said to be a "late bloomer". Despite these negatives, Velma still has a crush on him. Voiced by Glenn Howerton, known for his role as Charlie Day in *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, Fred is accused as the murder suspect of Brenda and Krista, despite lack of evidence which ties him to the crime.

Velma differs from previous Scooby-Doo series by not featuring Scooby-Doo as a character. Grandy, one of the show's executive producers, said that the show's staff struggled to find a take on this beloved dog. This coincided with Warner Bros. Animation telling them "Hey, you can't use the dog", as Grandy recalled.

Apart from Kaling, Wu, and Richardson, the cast is diverse, more than other Scooby-Doo series, including Black men, Black women, and actresses of Cuban, Chinese, Filipino, Malaysian, and Indian descent. This aligns with the focus of Kaling's small-but-powerful production company, Kaling International, which founded in 2012 and described by *Time* magazine as telling stories about "inner lives of women of color" and stories of underdogs.

While in previous iterations, Velma has been in romantic relationships with men, her romantic attraction to women was hinted in episodes of *Mystery Incorporated* and in 2022 animated film, *Trick or Treat Scooby-Doo!* In contrast, *Velma* depicts her as bisexual, as she has a crush on Fred, and accepts Daphne's feelings toward her. Like other versions, Norville has a

crush on her, but it is not received by Velma, as it appears. This leads him, to later, date a cool girl named Gigi (voiced by Yvonne Orji).

Daphne has a crush on Velma, kissing her at the end of the second episode (as shown in the video above), causing her to go into a bit of a panic. She has crushes on men as well. Her actions are partially affected by her two incompetent police detective mothers: Donna and Linda. Both are voiced by lesbian actresses: Wanda Sykes and Jane Marie Lynch. Lynch previously voiced a lesbian character, Mrs. Roop, in *The Ghost and Molly McGee*, while Sykes voiced a lesbian character Deb, in *Q-Force*.

This representation is not limited to Daphne, Velma, Donna, and Linda. Cherry Jones, who voices the mother of Fred, Victoria, is a lesbian actress, as is Fortune Feminister, voice of popular girl Olive. Others are unambiguously queer, such as Nicole Byer, the voice of Crystal Cove High principal (and mother of Norville) Blythe Rogers, and Shay Mitchell, the voice of Brenda. This series appears to be the first voice acting role of Mitchell.

Despite this, the characters of Donna and Linda appear to reinforce the lesbian cop trope, which depicts adult lesbian characters as cops. This trope is said to make such characters more palatable to so-called "average people" in the U.S., if these women, mainly women of color, are "helping to uphold the systems that oppress them".

These characters seem to fall into the has two moms / two dads trope, although such a trope ignores "traditional" views of family life necessitating a mother and father. In this case, Donna and Linda are the same gender as their parents, just as Barry and Randall Leibowitz-Jenkins are in *The Proud Family: Louder and Prouder*. In fact, Sykes had personally served as a former NSA contracting specialist for five years, something which could have influenced her role as a police detective in *Velma*.

This breaking of the nuclear family is present in Velma's family, as her original mother, Diya Dinkley (voiced by Sarayu Blue), left. As a result, her father, Aman (voiced by Russell Peters), a lawyer, re-marries to Sophie (voiced by Melissa Fumero), owner of a malt shop in town and a pregnant model. Velma often belittles the latter.

While the first season spotlights Velma's long, and strong, friendship with Daphne, with Velma even proposing they become girlfriends in episode 8, it ends with everything up in the air. As a result of the events in the show's season one finale, Velma's personal life is in shambles. This is unfortunate because the writers had a chance to make Velma/Daphne canon, but chose

not to. Instead, they went the route of *Never Have I Ever, Wednesday*, and even *Kashimashi Girl Meets Girl* by setting the groundwork for a likely love triangle between Daphne, Velma, and Norville, but not Fred. Such a development shows the limitations of *Velma*.

Velma has been received by critics, and those on social media, with mixed reviews. Apart from the diverse cast and LGBTQ+ representation, I was drawn into the series as a new fan to the Scooby-Doo franchise. The dialogue can, sometimes, be snappy, funny, and witty, while the plot can move along smoothly. The characters, themselves, can be compelling enough to make viewers sympathize with them, but aren't always this way.

Even though Velma is snarky, one can root for her at times, but not at others. The former is the case when she has horrifying hallucinations as she feels guilt for her mother's disappearance. The only parallel that comes to mind is Julian Chase in *gen:LOCK*. Although he is only alive as a copy of himself, as his original body barely survived, he faces internal demons, which manifest in his memoryscape, while he faces external demons in the form of the Nemesi, who are "evil" copies of him.

While there is some similarity between both characters, Velma doesn't face trauma akin to the terror Chase experiences. However, she still faces the crushing burdens and oppression of being a person of color, and is in part of some dangerous situations.

Velma sometimes cheapens its own protagonists, even making them unrelatable, at times. For instance, late in the season, Daphne begins a fake relationship with Fred so that both can become popular, even if it enrages Velma. Daphne also wants to become part of Jones Gentlemen's Accessories, and is willing to put everything on the line.

On the other hand, Velma acts awful to everyone throughout the series, even acting like she is in a relationship with Norville to fool her mom, Diya, who is recovering her memory. She is probably even worse than the toxicity of Penny Proud's long-time friends in *The Proud Family: Louder and Prouder*.

The series seemed to counter past claims about Norville's supposed drug use, as he says he hates drugs, and is only shown to be a nerd who likes Velma. While he might appear to be a stoner, he is annoyed, in the second episode, when stoners are listening to his online show. Funny enough, his father Lamont (voiced by Gary Cole), has a design like what Norville looked like in previous iterations. The season one finale hints that Norville may begin trying drugs, possibly marijuana, at the suggestion from his father.

In addition, there is a focus on beauty norms, shut-shaming, human experimentation, and the over-bearing power of the government (especially the police). In terms of the latter, the town's sheriff (voiced by Stephen Root), declares that they can't catch a serial killer because "it is a ghost", not because they are incompetent.

For example, in the fourth episode, it appears that Fred becomes a better person after reading *The Feminine Mystique.* Instead, Velma just sees him as problematic and gross, showing he hasn't changed. His character somewhat improves as the series moves forward, as he becomes surer of himself.

The voice actors of *Velma* are seasoned, making the series strong in that regard. Many have experience in TV, film, and even theatre roles, or previously played characters on other projects by Kaling, like *The Mindy Project* and *Never Have I Ever*.

Furthermore, some voiced characters in *Amphibia*, *Kim Possible*, *Milo Murphy's Law*, *Phineas and Ferb*, *Glitch Techs*, and *Big City Greens*, six all-ages series. Others provided voices in mature animations such as *Close Enough, American Dad!, Family Guy, Bojack Horseman, Harley Quinn*, *Star Trek: Lower Decks*, *Pantheon*, and *Bob's Burgers.*

I had hoped that characters like Dandruff Tuba, voiced by Weird Al Yankovic, would be more prominent. The name was familiar because he voiced Milo Murphy in *Milo Murphy's Law*, a character with so much extreme misfortune and bad luck that he is prepared for any situation thanks to his handy backpack. Sadly, he was underutilized in the series.

The voice talent of *Velma* comes through with actors like Richardson, who is best known for voicing Richard Splett in *Veep.* Also, Wu voiced the Mom in *Wish Dragon*, Lynch voiced characters in *Final Space*, Fumero voiced others in *Elena of Avalor* and *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power,* and Peters is a Black comedian. The cast of *Velma* includes well-known talent like Stephen Root, Ming-Na Wen (voicing Carroll), Debby Ryan (as Krista), and Frank Welker (voicing Fred's father).

Welker has voiced Fred since the character began to be animated in 1969. He previously voiced characters in a variety of series, like *Star Wars Resistance*, *3Below, Totally Spies!,* and *Futurama*. There is, additionally, Karl-Anthony Towns who voices Jacques Beau (Jock Boy). Towns is a professional basketball player of Dominican descent.

Although *Velma* is not my favorite series, I somewhat enjoyed watching the episodes. Others may have liked the series as much as I did, or perhaps even more, as *Velma* broke records for HBO Max in terms of the largest number of people watching an original animated series on its premiere day. In fact, at times, the comedy can be subtle and strong.

The series premiere is a miracle in and of itself, considering the HBO Max content purge championed by Warner Bros. Discovery CEO David Zaslav last year. Two series (*Summer Camp Island* and *Victor and Valentino)* were removed from the streaming platform, while *Craig of the Creek* had its final season order cut in half, and *Young Justice* was effectively cancelled.

All five of these shows, regardless of other issues, had outward LGBTQ+ representation. Previously, the platform shuttered *Final Space*, which featured a lesbian protagonist, Ash Graven, voiced by pansexual actress Ashly Burch. The acclaimed *Infinity Train,* which featured Black and Asian protagonists in the third and fourth seasons.

The fact that the series survived this purge could be due to the fact that it was produced by Warner Bros. Animation, along with 3 Arts Entertainment, Charlie Grandy Productions, and

Kaling International. Not only had Charlie Grandy Productions, the production company of executive producer Grandy, worked on previous projects with Kaling before, but an executive producer, Howard Klein, was one of the heads of 3 Arts Entertainment.

Another executive producer, Sam Register, headed Warner Bros. Animation, Cartoon Network Studios, and Hanna-Barbera Studios Europe. He had previously produced various Scooby-Doo and Tom & Jerry films, *Teen Titans, Scooby-Doo! Mystery Incorporated, Young Justice*, *Harley Quinn,* and many others.

Charlie Grandy Productions was known for producing *The Office*, *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, and *Duncanville*. The show's producer, Kandace Reuter*,* had worked on *Scooby-Doo!: The Sword and the Scoob* and *Thundercats Roar,* and the show's editors had worked on assorted series, such as *Undone*, *Bojack Horseman*, and *Tuca & Bertie*.

Despite all these experienced people, in the entertainment industry, working on *Velma*, it does not take away from one major flaw: music. Apart from a scene in the show's season one finale, in which Velma listens to old voicemails of Norville, the music is altogether unmemorable, and the theme song is strangely alienating.

This is too bad because a Bronx-born Black man, Craig DeLeon, who composed the score of the series, worked with renowned directors in the past. Perhaps his talent was not used as well as it could have been. There were no amazing songs like those in *D4DJ* or banger songs like the theme song of recently premiered *Moon Girl and Devil Dinosaur*.

This credibility of the show's producers may have been a reason that the series moved forward on HBO Max, just as *Harley Quinn* did. It could have been part of the rationale beyond the renewal of a Season 2 for *Velma*. Considering that the series became a "lightning rod for controversy" and garnered many hate-watchers, it may garner more of a cult following than anything else.

Although the series has incurred backlash, with Wikipedia claiming that audience response had been "overwhelmingly negative", it did not dissuade me from watching the series, nor even writing about it. Surely some of the criticisms, like the comedic lines which fall flat, or possible stereotypes have merit. But the show is not the worst thing out there as those review-bombing the series on IMDB and Rotten Tomatoes, or others complaining about it on social media and YouTube, may lead to you to believe.

This season had Fred, and his family, as the manifestation of White privilege and wealth. It is on par, in some ways, with the snobbishness and narcissism exemplified by nouveau riche protagonist Kaz Khan in *Neo Yokio*.

At the same time, the series exemplifies the reality of how easy it easy for someone, especially people of color, to be swept up in the criminal system. Velma herself is almost imprisoned for being at the wrong place at the wrong time before she falsely implicates Fred in the murder.

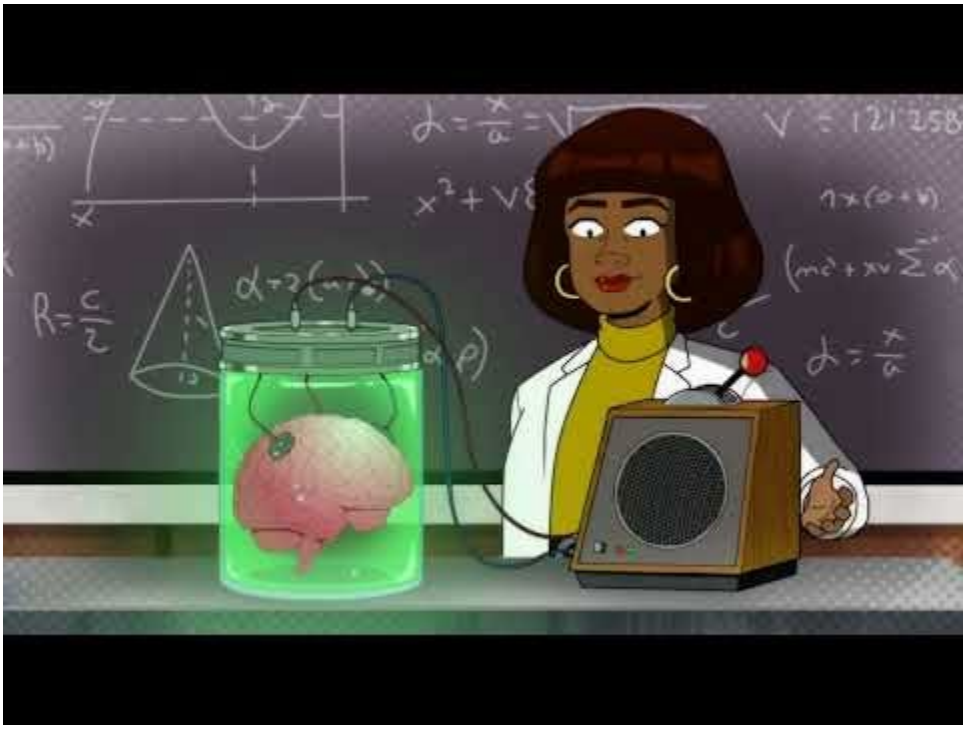
Thee show's plot only hints at part of what the Marshall Project noted in their November 2020 post about trials in the U.S.: that many felony convictions on the state and federal levels are often results of plea bargains, and prosecutors are some of the most powerful players in this criminal system, relying on sheriffs and police as key witnesses. In many of the states, as the Marshall Project noted, judges can charge for use of a public defender.

In *Velma*, the arrest of Fred by Donna and Linda is not questioned, despite Velma's defense of Fred, before his outburst causes the judge to declare him guilty. Velma's father, Aman, takes Fred's case because he wants the money for his girlfriend, Sophie, not because he genuinely believes in the case.

The series highlights the inadequacy of mental health care in the U.S., therapy, and gender disparity. The latter is exemplified by the school Principal, Blythe, only having 50 dollars in the

school budget to counter "centuries of toxic masculinity", which she uses to pay for an all-girls self-defense class, taught by Daphne's moms. The former is shown through Norville and his father.

I thought the story's focus, at first on experiments by Doctor Edna Purdue, the grandmother of Norville, a scientist who found a way to keep the human brain alive outside the body, was intriguing. I would say the same for the series plot about Velma's mom, Diya, her lost memory, and manipulation by a miscreant to commit the murders. However, it felt hollow in the end.



Velma reveals that Diya had been manipulated to recreate the lab of Dr. Purdue, recruited by Army General Henry Meeting to create the Special Covert Operations Brain Initiative (Scoobi), a reference to the original franchise. This manipulation happened through hypnosis by Fred's mother, Victoria (voiced by Cherry Jones). It is further noted that Velma herself was hypnotized as well.

Victoria states that she wanted to switch Fred's brain with someone more "ambitious", who she believed were “hot girls,” and keep the global brand of Jones Gentleman's Accessories afloat. This absurd plot cheapened the series. It was compounded by Velma's foolhardy attempt to get her mom to remember anything, involving massive lying, which blew up in her face, and her rupturing of friendship with Norville after falsely accusing his father as the serial killer.

While the social commentary on big companies which support politicians who "look the other way", as is the case for Jones Gentleman's Accessories, is apt, as much as the criticism of economic exploitation in *My Dad the Bounty Hunter*, it is muddled by the rest of the story.

For one, there are callbacks to the first episode of this series, when female characters were showering in the nude together, sexism by the police, and more. In the case of *Velma*, it is problematic that the villain is a woman in that it could send a bad message about women in positions of power.

Through all of that, the series seems to hint at a possible storyline for another season, as the police officer who received the file from Velma is killed while putting it in a "solved cases" box. Undoubtedly, in the next season, Velma will continue to use her "pretty good" detective skills, the relationship between Velma and Daphne may develop, and a new "conspiracy board"/"murder board" would come about. The series will likely have a love triangle between three of the protagonists: Daphne, Norville, and Velma.

This is because, in the season one finale, Velma inadvertently said she "loves" Norville, so he came to save her from the serial killer who is out to kill her, Daphne, and Fred. If this happens, and the story straddles the home/school lives of the main characters, and doesn't come into more of its own, it will feel more like a stale CW drama. That would be a serious loss of potential in a story which could be stronger if its plot had better execution.

In the end, this series is not great but not terrible, as hate-watchers have declared. Instead, it is only in the middle. So, I can't fully, and confidently, recommend giving this series a watch.

The first season of *Velma* is currently streaming on HBO Max.

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Chapter 6: What the World Thinks of "Velma"

HBO's Wokeified Scooby-Doo Reboot Achieves the Impossible
Mindy Kaling's Velma series breaks records despite intense backlash
How Velma became the most hated show on TV
Velma Becomes IMDB's Worst-Rated Animated TV Series Ever
HBO's 'Velma' Series Slammed by Fans Following Season Premiere
Why I'm Disappointed in Mindy Kaling
Velma review: A promising reinvention is wasted on lame jokes, prequelitis, and bad meta
The Line That Velma Crossed
HBO Max's 'Velma' Can't Scare Up a Reason to Exist: TV Review
'Velma' Review: HBO Max's 'Scooby-Doo' Prequel Is Too Snarky for Its Own Good
Velma Review: The Scooby Gang's Adult Animated Origin Story Is One Awkward "Zoinks!"
Mindy Kaling's 'Velma' buries its mysteries under a barrage of pop-culture quips
Scooby-Doo spin-off Velma sparks huge backlash following show's debut

A compilation of some headlines about Velma from various publications since the series debuted in January 2023, showing different views of the series.

Since its debut on HBO Max on January 12, 2023, *Velma*, the mature animated mystery horror comedy series has made the rounds either on social media platforms like Tumblr, Facebook, and Tik Tok, or in rants by YouTubers, who are hate-watching the series while trying to monetize off people's anger. The series reception has been mixed, with reported "overwhelmingly negative" reviews from the audience, if the show's Wikipedia page is to be believed, with reviewers focusing on issues with the show itself.

Reviewers have argued that the audience reception of *Velma* is negative, citing audience scores from Rotten Tomatoes, commentary by people on Twitter, low ratings on IMDB, Metacritic, and Google. However, none of those scores are a reliable measure of whether a series, film, or other media is worthwhile to watch. In fact, there is the phenomenon of review bombing, which is undoubtedly the case with *Velma*, as it was with *High Guardian Spice* and *Magical Girl Friendship Squad.* It is when a small group of people give a series, film, or other media low ratings, causing the overall rating to plummet.

This is further evidenced by the fact that *RWBY*, a captivating young adult animated series which recently began its ninth season/volume this year, has only about 6,500 ratings on IMDB, while *Velma* has over 70,000. Over those "users", about 87% gave the rating of 1 star. Furthermore, the fact that *Velma* has tens of thousands more ratings than *Steven Universe* or *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*, both of which ran for multiple seasons, makes it clear that people review-bombed the series.

One of the many reviews of the series came from *Parade* magazine. The publication declared that the series premiere "fell flat" with fans, citing Twitter users who called it a "disappointment", and stated that the show downplayed the #MeToo movement. It also noted that some on the social media platform claimed the show had a writing style of making "brown girls that hate themselves," portraying Indian girls as "losers", made Velma a self-insert for Mindy Kaling (who voices Velma), and called it "vulgar". To add to this, on the show's official account, in tweets possibly written by Kaling in the tone of her character, Daphne is described as a character who will be known "for much more than being hot", implying that Velma has feelings for her. Additionally, Velma expresses jealousy that Daphne has two "hilarious moms" and describes them as "Daphne's police officer moms".

While there is no doubt that the comedic writing of the series isn't always the best, it admittedly flew over my head at times, I don't believe there are any self-hating characters. While Velma seems to be "self-hating", in reality, she gets more depth as the series moves forward. No character is, by the end of the first season, shown as a loser. In terms of vulgarity, it is important to remember that vulgar means "of the common people", and it can be a charge leveled against LGBTQ+ people (and content).

In contrast, Ed Power of *The Telegraph*, a conservative British tabloid, claimed that the series "sexualized" teens, has "juvenile humor" and treats Fred as a stereotype. He also said the series is not "clever or subversive", but it rather an "accumulation of bad decisions", and claimed that the "left" and "right" united against the series. He also declared that some online had taken issue with Kaling's political views.

While I'm not sure about her exact political views are, apart from speaking out against White producers, it is important to remember she is only an executive producer of the series and is not even the series creator (that's Charlie Grandy). So, it seems wrong to say the series is "hers". Otherwise, Fred is no stereotype, as his character somewhat grows over the course of the series.

As noted earlier, some people have criticized Kaling's views, including when she liked a tweet of transphobe J.K. Rowling at one point. However, she is only part of the crew, as there are many other people working on *Velma*. In any case, it is better to examine the show's positives and negatives instead of just based on the views of one individual.

Furthermore, other than the shower scene in the first episode (which seems to be a reference to similar scenes in horror films), it does not appear that the series sexualizes anyone. *Velma* has nothing like the ecchi-esque themes in *My Dress-Up Darling*, cringe-worthy scenes in *Akebi's Sailor Uniform*, sexual assault in *Citrus,* or the protagonist of *The Great Jahy Will Not Be Defeated!*, Jahy, who wears a dirty long t-shirt and shorts (and a revealing outfit after she transforms into her demon form for temporary period of time). All of these series have fan service up the wazoo. In contrast, *Velma* does not have that.

As for being "clever" and "subversive", I would argue that *Velma* was never attempting to do either. Nor is the series a complete waste of time and energy as Nadria Goffe of *Slate* argued. I disagree with Goffe's claim that the show is misogynist, based on actions in the series by female characters and the fact that some (like Velma's stepmom) are toxic. At the same time, I agree that "race-swapped rebranding" can be good, when it's done well.

One of the more interesting aspects of *Velma* is how many of the relationships of the protagonists with their families are rocky, and unhealthy. There are too many series, especially in

animation, which portray families as positive and without problems. While that is the case for some people, it isn't the case for many others. One example of this is how Velma doesn't always get along with her dad, and even less with her stepmother, and another instance is how controlling Fred's parents can be of his life. This contrasts with Norville, who remains supported by his parents through it all.

It also differs from the relationship Daphne has with her two detective moms. The series bucks the trope of finding your "real" parents, since Daphne believes that she is reconnecting with her birth parents (Brenda and Darryl), who are members of the Crystal Mines gang. But it turns out they are just manipulating her. Even so, the reunion of Velma with her two moms afterward cannot compare with the heartfelt revelation of Turanga Leela's two parents in the fourth season of *Futurama*.

Goffe states that they don't know who the show is made for. I'd presume that the series is made for Indian American women, and other adults, but that's just my guess. I also disagree with the argument by Shirley Li, of *The Atlantic,* that the series punishes its audience for being invested in the characters. In fact, I would argue that the series does reward viewers to some extent, as Daphne and Velma, especially, become more relatable, despite their personality flaws, in some regards.

Aysia Iftikar of *Pink News* noted that fans have relentlessly criticized the series, citing the show for "perpetuating stereotypes against South Asian women...poor attempts at self-aware comedy and...losing the essence of what people love about the Scooby Doo gang." She also stated that some took issue with the "crude" adult humor and said the show "annihilated" the character of Velma in previous iterations. Those are of Indian descent would have a different view of the series than me, as a White man, so I can't, personally, speak to any possible stereotypes in the series when it comes to South Asian women. On the other hand, I agree with those who argue that Kaling is being held to an "impossible standard" as compared to other producers and creators.

Much of the aforementioned criticism seems to stem from the fact that *Velma* is a stark contrast from its predecessors. There is no rule that reboots or revivals have to be the same as the original series. To give an example, *The Proud Family: Louder and Prouder* is different from *The Proud Family*, as it is more glitzy than its predecessor. So, it is no surprise that *Velma* would not have the same structure, humor, or plot as those Scooby-Doo series that came before it,

which were aimed at all ages, rather than adults. This is especially the case since Scooby-Doo is not part of the series, which is an understandable decision.

Comments by the above-mentioned reviewers pale in comparison to Taylor Henderson's review on Pride.com, which states that *Velma* doesn't "live up to the hype" and is a "crude, cliche, self-aware...incoherently violent...thinking mess of a series". He adds that bisexual energy from Velma and Daphne doesn't "save" the series. The latter sentiment was echoed by Heather Hogan of *Autostraddle.* While there is undeniably "hype" around the series, and it surely is crude and cliche, and even self-aware, I have to laugh at the comment about "incoherent" violence in the series.

The series is much tamer, in its violence, than the Indian Tegulu blockbuster film, *RRR*, which includes a scene of British colonists mauled by wild animals, the extreme violence in *Akiba Maid War* (especially in the first episode), the blood-filled scenes throughout *The Legend of Vox Machina,* or the occasionally gruesome scenes in *gen:LOCK*, especially in the last season. Perhaps *Velma* is a mess, as Henderson points out, but it has some merits.

Joshua Alston of *Variety* magazine posed similar arguments, calling the series "irreverent to a fault", designed to be "labeled a childhood-ruining travesty", and said while *Velma* centers Velma's queer identity, it is not groundbreaking. Alston also says the characters are "unpleasant"

to spend time around, notes the number of pop culture references and referential jokes", and asks why the show needs to exist at all.

Alston makes good points, in terms of the number of reference to pop culture or referential jokes, and the fact that the show isn't groundbreaking, considering the recent LGBTQ animated characters in *The Proud Family: Louder and Prouder*, *RWBY: Ice Queendom*, *Dead End: Paranormal Park*, and *Star Trek: Lower Decks*, to name a few. At the same time, I would argue that the characters are designed to be unpleasant and not-all-together likable. I see a likeness to the *Never Have I Ever* protagonist Devi Vishwakumar. She is not the most likable person, and can be a jerk to people, with her behavior said to make her a "real person" in the eyes of some.

Angie Han, TV critic for *The Hollywood Reporter*, takes a different tact. She says that the series employs many common tropes, is extremely self-aware, is like *Riverdale*, and states that the characters are "joke-delivery machines" rather than individuals. She further says that *Velma* doesn't lose sight of the affection for the heroine, has thoughtful and emotionally honest moments, and criticizes the emphasis on "snark over heart," noting that is something the show could "stand to consider for itself."

In terms of the reviewers I noted so far in this post, I agree with Han above any of the others because she is more fair and less negative. One of the show's weaknesses is that it falls in line with the same tropes in shows like *Riverdale*, just as *Wednesday* does repeatedly. But, *Velma* does not include the harmful anti-Black undertones that *Wednesday* has, in part because Black characters are not villains in this series. The jokes can be stale, and the pop culture references will mean little if it is watched a few years from now, just as similar humor in *Futurama* doesn't land as well now as it did when it aired. On the other hand, the show's emotional honesty and thoughtfulness at times are some of the strongest moments.

There are a few more reviews I'd like to mention before ending this post. One of those is from Liz Shannon Miller in *Consequence*. She argues that there is "too much jammed into this series" and that there is "no clear focus". She also states that the series feels toned down as compared to mature animation currently in development, while trying to be "super-edgy".

On the other hand, Miller praises the voice acting and the "bright, poppy, and fun" animation, and criticizes the writing as inadequate. I'd have to agree as the writing can be lackluster, but would say that although the show's focus can be disparate, it is be strongest when Velma or Daphne are solving mysteries of their own, whether about birth parents (in the case of Daphne) or an evil scientist switching brains (in the case of Velma).

Richard Roeper of the *Chicago Sun-Times* and Darren Franich of *Entertainment Weekly* said the same thing as Miller. Roeper criticized the jokes and humor as exhausting, the writing as subpar, while praising the casting as diverse. Franich described the show as a "new bland, a deconstructed canonical bonanza pulled right off the corporate assembly line" and stated that *Harley Quinn*, also on HBO Max, is better constructed, and stronger, an argument with some merit. This is undoubtedly the case as *Velma* does try and poke at storytelling methods, like flashbacks and callbacks, but *Harley Quinn* does the same more effectively.

The views of Roeper and Miller are aligned with what is stated on the show's Rotten Tomatoes page: that the show has "plenty of attitude and style" but does not have the "first clue

for how to turn its clever subversion into engaging fun." For one, I would argue that the series is more dramatic than funny, although it's writing can be lacking, it is not bland. It is different than previous iterations, but is not "subversive". Kaling, herself, never described the series that way.

In an October 2022 review, she told *Entertainment Weekly* that it was fun to voice Velma, that she and Charles? Grandy were "inspired by *Into the Spider-Verse", said* that with animation they could do anything, and stated "the essence of Velma is not necessarily tied to her whiteness...I identify so much as her character...so many people do...[so we decided,] let's make her Indian in this series." She further said that Velma is the heart of the show, that she is a "big fan of *Scooby Doo*," and that Velma felt like the best character "to handle a scarier environment" like *Veronica Mars* and *Riverdale.* In addition, Grandy said the idea of the series is not to "completely replace" previous shows, but just to be a "one little weird ice planet in the Scoobyverse."

In his article, Toon4Thought puts it well. He argued that he didn't mind changes to characters or get behind the "visceral hatred" for *Velma* Instead, he criticized the show's writing and praised the actual mystery as "engaging enough". He added that the writing for the characters feels "very haphazard" and more like *Family Guy* than a dramatic character-driven story. Even so, he argued that the show could use a rewrite to fix inconsistencies in characters and balance humor, but said that people were disingenuous with approaching the series, especially with claims it was a "franchise killer". He concluded by saying that, overall, the show was a letdown, with clumsy and unfocused writing, and said that while an audience can demand better and rip media to shreds, "we also can and should not be assholes about it."

I have to agree with Toon4Thought, even more than others I've mentioned in this post. Before *Velma*, I've watched shows strongly disliked, by a core group of people, such as *gen:LOCK* and *High Guardian Spice*, and especially enjoyed watching the latter. However, *Velma* was nothing like either of those series. Sometimes, the show made good points, like in the seventh episode when Velma crossdresses as a guy named "Manny", everyone appreciates her worst qualities, and the series makes fun of how a guy can "do anything" and their male power. In addition, there is a social commentary in the final episode about human experimentation, corporate power, and even hypnosis. However, the latter is not as evocative as that in Jordan Peele's well-known horror film, *Get Out*, where the protagonist, Chris Washington, is hypnotized to purportedly "cure" his addiction to smoking.

This brings me to two reviews from *CBR*. In the first of these, by Sean Migalla, argued that the series "struggled" through the first season, with a "lack of commitment" to plotlines, but can "find its footing" in a second season. He also said the second season wouldn't be under the microscope as much as the first season. The second, by Joshua M. Patton, argued that the show is indicative of an "identity crisis" among new owners of HBO Max (Warner Bros. Discovery), calling it a "callous remixing" of Scooby-Doo which would do better if it was family-friendly. He concludes that it pushed boundaries in "desperate reach for an edge" and is formulaic in contrast to *Harley Quinn*.

Part of what Migalla and Patton are talking about is indicative in episode 8 of *Velma*, which appears to make fun of flashbacks and their use in storylines, with the flashbacks of each of the main characters intersecting with each other. That same episode further reinforces their arguments, as there are many intersecting plotlines, callbacks to the original series, and romantic drama. Patton is right that the show tries to be edgy. For example, in episode 9, Norville makes fun of Teddy Roosevelt as a murderous imperialist, but never expands upon his one-off comment. The new owners of HBO Max may be in a bit of a crisis of identity over the company's new CEO, David Zaslav, engaging in a content purge, angering many animators.

Apart from these reviews is an article by Kate Francis in *Digital Spy*. She notes the "abject disappointment" of fans over *Velma*, and hopes that the series can take in the feedback of fans and "come back swinging with fresh Scooby content soon." While I have my criticisms of the series, I hope that what Francis is talking about happens, and the second season of the series allows the show to blossom, coming back even stronger than before.

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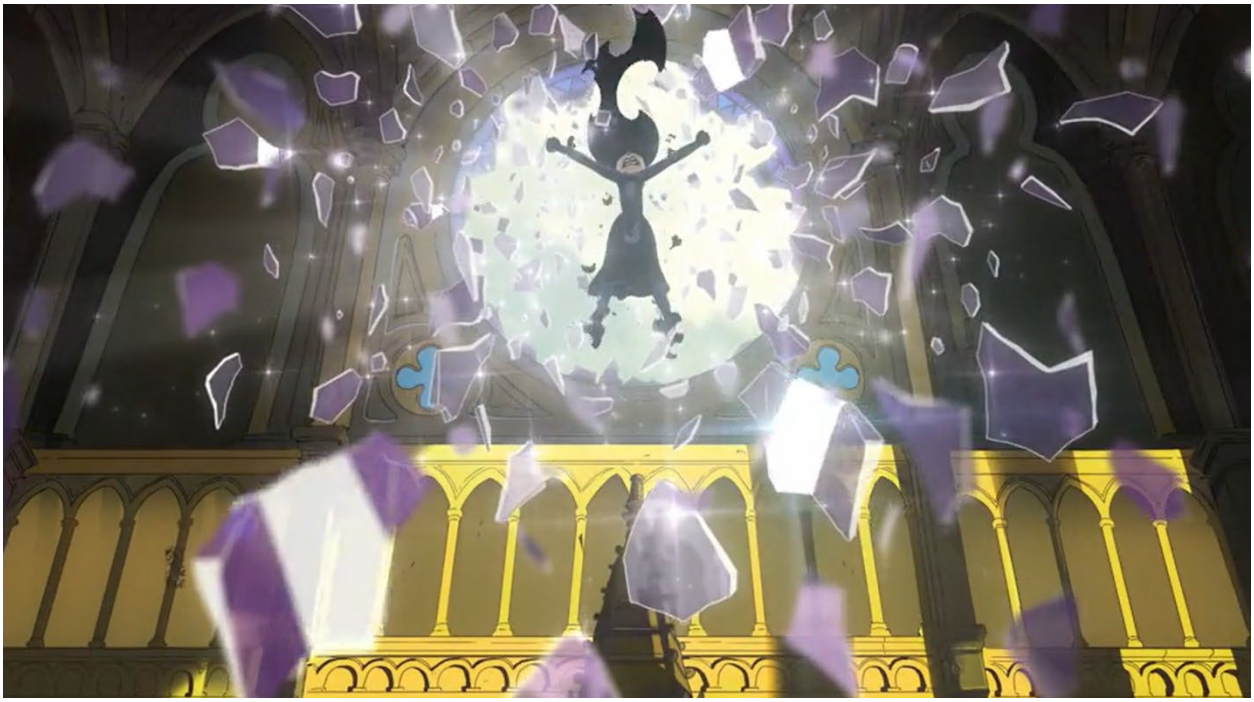
Chapter 7: Unicorn: Warriors Eternal Spoiler-Filled Review



Unicorn: Warriors Eternal is a mature supernatural fantasy comedy with steampunk elements. Genndy Tartakovsky, who is well-known in the animation industry, is the director and creator. He is best known for *Dexter's Laboratory, Star Wars: Clone Wars, Sym-Bionic Titan,* and *Samurai Jack*, and more recently, *Primal.* This piece was written during the 2023 WGA and SAG-AFTRA strikes. Without the labor of the writers and actors currently on strike, *Unicorn: Warriors Eternal,* being reviewed here, wouldn't exist.

This series has a simple plot: a group of heroes are inadvertently awakened by Copernicus, a steam-powered robot, in bodies of three teenagers (Emma, Alfie, and Dimitri), rather than in bodies of adults, like in the past. These heroes are opposed by a mysterious foxlike woman (voiced by Grey DeLisle), who embodies evil.

Unicorn: Warriors Eternal drew me in as a person who enjoyed watching *Star Wars: Clone Wars* as a kid (and have re-watched it various times), and liked *Samurai Jack* and *Sym-Bionic Titan*. Voice actors like Jacob Dudman (voice of Edred) who voiced two characters in *Primal*, and DeLisle, voice of the mysterious woman and the original Melinda, strengthen this series.

Delisle is well-known for her work in animation, including voicing characters in *Invincible*, *Kid Cosmic*, *The Owl House*, *Kipo and the Age of Wonderbeasts*, *DC Super Hero Girls*, *She-Ra*

and the Princesses of Power, *Elena of Avalor, Star Wars Rebels, The Legend of Korra, Young Justice,* and *My Life as a Teenage Robot.* In contrast, Hazel Doupe, the voice of Emma in this series, is unique. This is her first voice role, as she has only done live-action series before.

I wasn't as familiar with Jeremy Crutchley, Demari Hunte, Alain Uly, Tom Milligan, Ron Bottita, or George Webster, the voices of Merlin, Alfie, Seng, Lord Edward Fairfax, and Winston in *Unicorn: Warriors Eternal*. I say this even though Crutchley voiced Glad-One and One in *Infinity Train,* and Uly as Lieutenant Maylur and two stormtroopers in *Star Wars: The Bad Batch*.

Others, such as Hunte, Milligan, Bottita, Webster, appear to be new to voice work. Rosalind Ayres (voice of Lord Katherine Fairfax) previously voiced characters in video games while Robbie Daymond (voice of various one-off characters) lent his voice to the notorious Curious Cat in Volume 9 of *RWBY*! He voiced Jesse in *Infinity Train* season 2, Raymond in *OK K.O. Let's Be Heroes!*, and many other English dubs of anime characters.

The steampunk setting in Victorian London, in 1890, in this series, reminded me of Steamland in *Disenchantment*, the upper city in *Arcane*, or the similarly steampunk action anime, *Princess Principal*, which spawned a multi-part film series. The steampunk genre has even reached into indie animation and comics. It includes films like *Snowpiercer, Atlantis: The Lost Empire,* and *Howl's Moving Castle,* along with animated series like *Nadia: The Secret of Blue Water* and *The Legend of Korra.* I am even reminded of an unaired 2001 pilot for *Constant Payne*, by Indigenous writer Micah Wright. It has a strong steampunk aesthetic.

Unicorn: Warriors Eternal is different than all of those previously mentioned. It is unique in its own way. Just as *Samurai Jack* was set in the future, with magic, robots, lasers, and the like, this series is set in an alternate world. Unlikely the haphazard and strange inclusion of futuristic technology in the far-too-short *Yasuke,* this series is much more complete. It draws inspiration from works by animators Max Fleischer and Osamu Tezuka, films by Hayao Miyazaki (like *Howl's Moving Castle)* and other steampunk aesthetics.

The show's character designer, Stephen DeStefano, worked on *Sym-Bionic Titan*, *Primal*, and other projects, with Tartakovsky. He pushed, as did Tartakovsky, to ensure the series had an "old aesthetic" but was told "in a very contemporary way". The studio producing the series, Cartoon Network Studios, has produced many of Tartakovsky's previous projects. Some of the same animators who worked on his previous projects may be working on this series.

These animators could not do their work without the writers. If a recently circulated spreadsheet is representative of Cartoon Network Studios as a whole, it would mean that, for animators, there is repetitive work, little opportunity for advancement, sterile environment due to the Warner-Discovery merger, disorganization, burnout, and overwork. There are two primary show writers: Darrick Bachman and Tartakovsky. While the latter is more well-known, the former is not, despite his work on *Primal*, *Samurai Jack*, *Regular Show*, *Star Wars: Clone Wars*, and many animated series, some of which he worked on with Tartakovsky.

If Glassdoor is accurate, each of these writers makes somewhere between $46,000 to $83,000 a year. I would guess that Tartakovsky is paid more than Bachman. In any case, the conditions the writers work in influences whether a show is "high-quality" or "low-quality". *High Guardian Spice* was said to be the latter, until it was revealed that the working conditions at Crunchyroll were horrendous. This does not appear to be the case for Cartoon Network Studios. The recent closure of the iconic studio's headquarters, with employees told to move to a sterile, lifeless Warner Bros. building instead, it does not bode well.

Even some predicted that under David Zaslav, it is difficult to "imagine a future in which the studio's original animation output can match what it has been in the past," with a strong shit to reboots rather than original series. However, if the writers, and actors, are successful in their strike, these conditions may change for the better. On the other hand, the studios are doing all they can to burn down motivation of actors and writers, while stockpiling completed works and scripts before the strikes began.

Coming back to the series, Unicorn: *Warriors Eternal* is a relatable coming-of-age story. The protagonist, Emma (who can transform into Melinda) is struggling to determine whether she is "Emma" or "Melinda". She loses control of her powers after any emotional outburst she has. Having one's powers tied to their emotions is not new. In the last half of *Elena of Avalor*'s final season, the protagonist, Elena Castillo Flores, had to wrestle with the fact that her magical abilities were tied to her emotional moods. The same was the case for Steven Universe in the series of the same name, and in *Steven Universe Future.*

For Emma/Melinda, her anger and fury seem to be how she expresses her power, in a super saiyan esque transformation. While this expression of raw power can be effective in defeating enemies, it doesn't prevent her from hurting people, unintentionally, in the process. For instance, in the second episode, she uses this power to defeat a huge magically possessed elephant. However, her fiancé Winston is badly hurt in the process and the surrounding area is nearly obliterated.

The use of her abilities in *Unicorn: Warriors Eternal* are complicated by her relationship with Edred, a warrior elf. He reincarnates in the body of a wanna-be magician named Dimitri. After Copernicus resurrects him, he rushes over to Emma/Melinda, and kisses her. While he has memories of their relationship, Melinda-as-Emma does not. Making matters worse, she still has some romantic feelings for Winston, who wants to "rescue" her from her "new" form.

This contrasts with Edred. He can effectively fight with a sword in manner which almost seems reminiscent of the sword-wielders in anime or those in Western animations like *Amphibia, She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*, and *Steven Universe*. Like all Tartakovsky productions, Edred has his own specific style. Every character is stylized in their own way. This is thanks to the aforementioned character designer, DeStefano, and work by many others at Cartoon Network Studios. The same is the case for their battle moves and attacks. It sets the series apart from others with similar themes.

The team of Emma/Melinda, a cosmic monk named Seng (in the body of a young Black ruffian named Alfie), Copernicus, and Edred, make an interesting combination. Each has personal issues they must overcome. Seng cannot fully comprehend the cosmic plane as a young child. Edred has a "clouded" mind despite having a largely intact memory and retains his power. Emma/Melinda has an identity crisis. She even tells Winston, at one point, that she isn't Emma anymore and that the Emma he knew is dead. This is a cold, hard truth which is hard for him to accept.

The complications in each character's lives make it an increasing challenge for these heroes, whose souls are tasked with protecting the world throughout eternity. With the scrambled memories, especially of Emma/Melinda, and the fact that only Edred remembers the most about their role in fighting evil, it makes the story that much more intriguing. The secretive villain is almost as devious as Shadowy Figure in *O.K. KO!*, but shares more characteristics with Kilgore in *Justice League x RWBY: Super Heroes and Huntsmen, Part 1.* He aimed to change the Justice League into teenagers, so they are "vulnerable", are ripped apart by the world, and must deal with emotions they ignore or regress as adults.

There is one major difference. The villain in *Unicorn: Warriors Eternal* never intended on awakening the Order of the Unicorn (Melinda, Seng, Edred, and Copernicus). Instead, she wanted to destroy Copernicus so the order would cease to exist. The villain exploits the situation for her own ends. She hopes that these heroes will be resurrected one final time. The heroes will do anything they can to stop this evil, with Edred declaring that the villain will "not succeed".

In future seasons, Melinda's insecurities may be exploited just as Invictus did with Ash Graven in *Final Space.* If so, she may turn against her friends. It is hard to say whether the series villain will be as devious as Aku, who had built an entire empire and dedicated many of his resources to track down Samurai Jack.

By the show's third episode, there is a clear focus on discrimination, specifically how humans will "other" that which they don't understand. The response of the British police and Scotland Yard to a theft of priceless artifacts bound for the British Museum is to arrest anyone engaged in "magic" in London. There are mass arrests of soothsayers, fortune tellers, and anyone else on Mystic Row.

To make matters worse, they put up a Wanted poster for Emma/Melinda. Even when two spiritualists, Clarice Leydoux and Lao Xi Sheng, tell the police detective the reality, he doesn't believe them. Clearly, the police in this series, including Inspector General Hastings (voiced by Gildart Jackson), do not know how to deal with the situation at hand. People such as Agatha (voiced by Rosalind Ayres), another royal official, try and put in place more order.

Through it all, Emma/Melinda tries to figure it out herself. She isn't sure of her connection with Winston, who she inadvertently injured. She even goes to a seance which separated her two identities, making her question whether she wants to be a hero or not. As a result, she declares that she hates the other part of herself. Her father even realizes that she is different, remarking "that is not our daughter". Winston remains in pursuit, even when he clashes with Edred on who "truly" loves her.

After the first two episodes, the series explored the insecurities of Seng. The villains cause him to be swallowed by a cosmic fox. The latter, known as a Lady Box, attacks them. An

amazingly animated chase scene on the rooftops follows, reminding me of similar scenes in *Star Wars: The Clone Wars* and *Samurai Jack*. In the fourth episode, this is more apparent. Seng is unable to use his powers while he is trapped on an abandoned ship with other Unicorn team members. He even starts to become translucent! Although they escape this predicament, it could foreshadow more trouble for Seng in the future.

As Emma/Melinda learns more about the story of her Melinda side, with the child version of original Melinda voiced by Marley Cherry Hilbourne. She learns that her mother, Morgan Le Fay (voiced by Peta Johnson), was terribly injured, thanks to her. It is revealed that Merlin (voiced by Jeremy Crutchley) is her father. The conflict between the two halves of herself remains an important part of the story. This is especially the case when they all fight a big squid threatening to destroy the town. Her attempts at reconciliation do not go well, even though she is making some progress by the seventh episode.

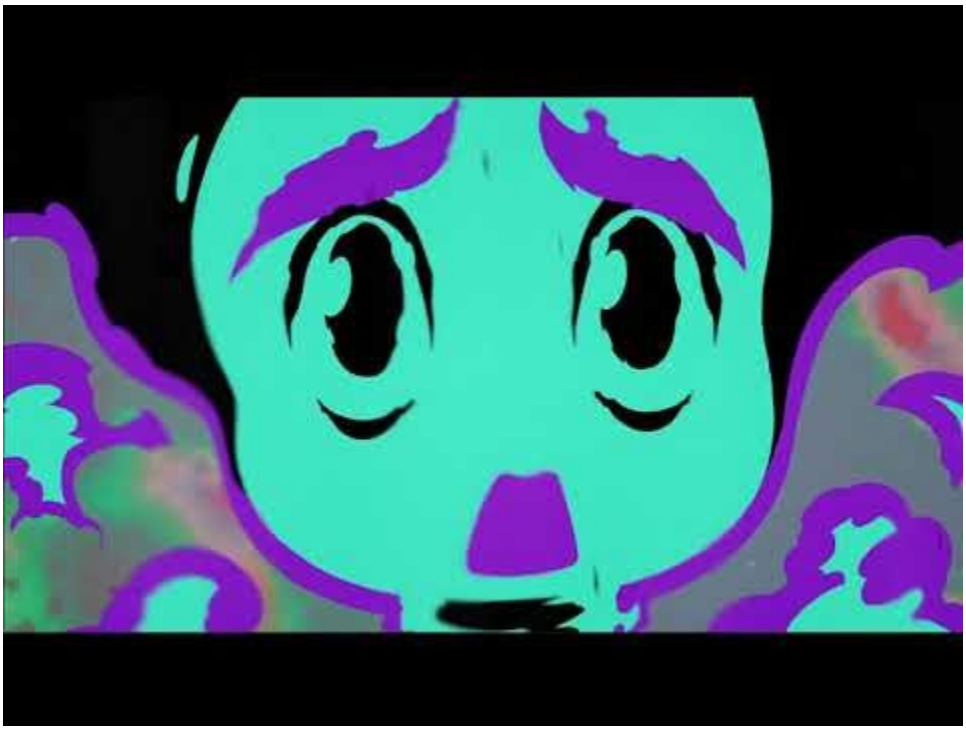
At the end of the fifth episode, *Unicorn: Warriors Eternal* takes a bold step: it appears to kill off one of its protagonists, Copernicus. This is comparable to a similar "loss" of Octus in *Sym-Bionic Titan*. While Emma/Melinda is most distraught, she works together with Eldred to find someone to repair Copernicus. They find an inventor named Otto (voiced by Jason O'Mara), thanks to a robot named Dashwood (voiced by Chris Butler). He works on a huge floating airship, which functions like a space station.

He remarks that Copernicus is like a robot he hasn't created yet, but he says it feels familiar. Copernicus cannot fully come back until his magical power is restored. He is a futuristic magical being. The power from an ancient magical stone is used by Merlin. He brings Copernicus back to life. Even so, this sequence implies that Copernicus can die, in certain instances.

The seventh episode of *Unicorn: Warriors Eternal* is a rollercoaster ride. It is revealed that Edred left his bride-to-be, in an arranged marriage meant to unite two clans, to be with Melinda. At the same time, it is further implied that Emma/Melinda somewhat remembers this. The quest to get the necessary magical power, the presence of Merlin, and restoration of balance, causes Edred's brother, Aelwulf (voiced by Jack Bandeira), to regain respect for him.

At the end of the seventh episode, the Unicorn team learns that they still have evil to fight, and that their time in this world has not ended. It is implied that Merlin will help them stop it. The eighth episode throws this into question. Out of nowhere, Merlin appears and tells them to

come "quickly" to battle an evil machine killing the land. While they meet the mighty tiger Rakshasa (voiced by Sunkrish Bala), Merlin attacks Emma/Melinda, surprising them all.



The last three episodes of *Unicorn: Warriors Eternal* lay bare tensions between the group members. This is clear with the addition of a new member, Winston, who can become a werewolf. Predictably, Edred objects, as Winston has feelings for Emma/Melinda. All the while there is the fight against evil, which exudes dark magic.

This reaches a critical point in the ninth episode when the evil leaves Merlin and enters the cosmic realm. They meet an older Seng who has been fighting it for over 20 years, with no success. It is said that if the evil devours everything, the world will end. Merlin and Rakshasa remain optimistic until Emma and Melinda are split apart.

I wish *Unicorn: Warriors Eternal* had been longer. By the eighth episode, it appears that Melinda is coming to peace with the part of her who is Emma, and vice versa. This seemed too quick. Her struggle with her identity could have stretched across an entire season of 20 to 26 episodes. Take Cassandra in *Rapunzel's Tangled Adventure*, for example. Zhan Tri mentally manipulates her. Even so, she tries to figure out her identity and how she feels about Rapunzel. Like that series, which ended with a bang, this series is burdened by compulsory heterosexuality. *Tangled* differs by featuring well-recognized gay vibes between Rapunzel and Cassandra, shipped by fans as "Cassunzel".

Much of the internal struggle that Emma/Melinda experiences is couched by a love triangle. Emma loves Winston, while Melinda loves Edred. However, Edred hates Winston and vice versa. Due to the propensity of male characters in this series, there isn't any character, female, non-binary, or otherwise, written for Emma/Melinda that would allow her to have a queer romance.

Even so, the struggle of Emma to reunite with Melinda, resulting in defiance of her by-the-book parents, is promising. Considering this series is set in the 1890s, it is no shock that Emma's parents try to hold her back. They think she is out of her mind and want to take her to a doctor, who will commit her to an asylum. Her actions, including drawing on equations on the walls of the bathroom, akin to the oft-memed scene from *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* in which Pepe Silvia goes on a conspiratorial rant, don't help her case. In her defense, she is desperate and wants to get back to the cosmic realm at any cost.

This episode goes off the rails when two huge men try to capture Emma and bring her to "the doctor". What follows is an intense chase scene in which Emma has many near-death experiences, and barely escapes those trying to get her, even riding a steam-powered tram to Mystics Row. Two mystic warriors (Clarice Leydoux and Lao Xi Sheng) offer to help her. With their assistance, she uses the Heart of the Forest to get to the cosmic realm.

The *Unicorn: Warriors Eternal* finale concludes strongly. Emma inspires everyone, reuniting with Melinda, and convinces them to combine their powers into one. They strike a decisive blow against evil forces. This is blunted by the surprising revelation: Morgan is trapped in the heart of the evil beast! At the end of the episode, the protagonists find themselves in a bizarre world in which "the evil" has changed everything. Emma/Melinda gets the last word, noting their determination to save Morgan and defeat the evil being no matter what.

The ending is not definitive, but is open-ended. The central conflict rings true, especially if seen as a metaphorical extension of Genndy Tartakovsky as a Jewish immigrant who faced pressure to support his mother and live up to the myth of a "model minority". A possible second, or even third, and fourth season could expand upon these characters and their struggles. Possibly, the series may go an *Infinity Train* route, having different characters for each season.

I hope that any possible future seasons of *Unicorn: Warriors Eternal* would increase diversity of the cast. Surely, there are talented voice actors like a Black men Demari Hunte (voice of Seng) and Victor Alli (voice of Adult Seng). They are joined by a Filipino man, Alain

Uy (voice of Lao Xi Sheng), an American actor of Tamil descent, Sunkrish Bala (voice of Rakshasa), and a British actor of Iraqi, Lebanese, and Indian descent, Brian George (voice of Darvish).

From the available lists of the cast members, I'm not seeing much diversity beyond the aforementioned individuals. A quick read of the cast list for *Primal* indicates that the series has a much more diverse cast than this series! Perhaps, this is just reflecting the fact that historically, London was ethnically homogeneous, composed primarily of White British residents, until after World War II. By 1891, over 5.6 million were living in Greater London, a number which would grow in later years.

Cartoon Network Studios president, Sam Register, is an executive producer, and Shareena Carlson is supervising director. *Unicorn: Warriors Eternal* is expertly animated thanks to Studio La Cachette in France and Studio Zmei in Bulgaria. Cartoon Network Studios is the aforementioned production company. This is reinforced by the show's music, composed by Tyler Bates and Joan Higginbottom. It is effective, connecting the action with the story. It makes you excited to watch each episode, and become more invested in the characters.

None of this is much of a surprise. Bates is a well-known producer, composer, and musician, primarily of action and horror media, including the *John Wick* franchise. He was probably

chosen because he composed the music scores of *Sym-Bionic Titan,* the fifth (and final) season of *Samurai Jack*, and *Primal*.

Similarly, Higginbottom was a composer on the same season of *Samurai Jack*, *Primal,* and *John Wick Chapter 4*. Tara Billinger, known as the creator of *Long Gone Gulch* and a storyboarder, did production work on the series as well. The animators either worked on French productions not known in the U.S., or series such as *Love, Death & Robots*, and *Primal*. Even Tartakovsky did some storyboarding. The animation, background art, and set pieces are strong in this series.

Unicorn: Warriors Eternal may have been a passion project for Tartakovsky. However, it is incorrect that the plot is "humdrum". Furthermore, Emma/Melinda is not a "poorly written" character, nor does she have a "pat dilemma" or lack emotional complexity. Her struggles are at the series' center. On the other hand, this series, like *Dexter's Laboratory, Samurai Jack, Star Wars: Clone Wars, Sym-Bionic Titan,* and *Primal,* is male-centered. In fact, Emma/Melinda is the only female protagonist.

The series has "urgent stakes" and the characters are intriguing. This accompanies amazing mythologies and some worldbuilding. It could be better, but it is not missing "the magic of Tartakovsky". Instead, this series is unique and different from other Tartakovsky series in the past. Surely, I'd love to have queer characters and even have a love triangle akin to the one between Hazumu Osaragi, Yasuna Kamiizumi, and Tomari Kurusu in *Kashimashi: Girl Meets Girl*. Unfortunately, this series did not go that direction, instead having male-female couples, without any one-way crushes.

Overall, despite my criticisms, *Unicorn: Warriors Eternal* is an enjoyable series and I'd recommend it. I can hope that it improved to become even better, breaking out of the good-evil dichotomy, and other common tropes used in Tartakovsky's work.

Unicorn: Warriors Eternal can be watched on Adult Swim or streamed on Max, DirectTV, and Spectrum. It can be purchased through Prime Video, Google Play, Vudu, or Microsoft Store.

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Animation	★★★★★
Voice Acting	★★★★★
Music	★★★★★
Story	★★★☆☆

4.5

★★★★½

Concluding Words

After putting this together, I am inspired to continue writing reviews of mature animation. I have some coming later this year on *Disenchantment* [part 5], *Adventure Time: Fionna and Cake*, *Young Love*, *Futurama* [Season 8], *Star Trek: Lower Decks* [Season 4], and possibly *Helluva Boss*, among many others.

- Burkely

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